

a stitch away from making it by [LostInAdmiration](#)

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Summary:

“I’m gonna miss you so much,” he mumbled. It felt like a ridiculous thing to say in a kitchen covered in flour on a sunny Saturday afternoon, the words too dark and heavy for the setting they were in. But they were the words constantly looping around Richie’s head lately, trying to claw their way out, and Richie was never very good at holding his tongue.

Eddie’s eyes shone a little bit as he moved closer so that he could hold Richie’s hand properly, bringing their joined hands up to his chest, leaving more white prints there.

“But you won’t,” he replied, quietly, carefully, like it was something Richie didn’t already know. “You can’t miss someone you don’t even

remember.”

1. gray areas and expectations

Richie knew drugs were bad, objectively. He'd had the talks from his parents and heard all the horror stories - mostly from Eddie - but when you'd spent your childhood fighting a demon clown that wanted to *eat you*, every other risk seems kind of pathetic in comparison.

It was Bev and Richie that got high together the most. Richie loved it, and loved how calm it made him feel. He always felt like he had electricity coursing through him, and like if he didn't move or speak or do *something* he'd explode. He'd take whatever he could get to help slow his body down and dull his senses for a while. So when Bev had turned up at his door with a bag of weed and a smirk, Richie had grinned wide and practically dragged her to their clubhouse.

"Richie, you are way too big for this town," Bev announced suddenly after they'd sat and smoked in silence for a while. Her voice was loud and raspy and it pulled Richie out of his thoughts with a start.

She was sprawled out on the old armchair that was riddled with holes, her legs dangling over one arm of the chair and her head hanging off the other. Richie was sat with his back against the chair, head tilted to look up at the roof, and Bev had one hand tangled in his hair whilst the other hand reached out for the joint Richie had between his lips. He took one more drag before handing it over and she hummed happily, scratching her nails gently into his scalp in a silent thanks.

"I don't *think* there's a height limit in Derry?" Richie replied with a frown, his smoke-filled brain only running at half speed. His friends often made jokes about how tall Richie had gotten - they had a chart scratched into the wood by the stairs of the clubhouse that recorded each of the Loser's heights, and Richie's was way above the rest of them. He wasn't tall but stocky and in proportion like Mike was; it was more like someone had just taken him and stretched him out, his limbs gangly but his frame still as scrawny as it was when he was younger. He started to imagine a '*you must be this tall to ride!*' Sign propped up on the outside of Derry by its dated welcome sign, and he started to laugh to himself.

Bev snorted, and Richie tilted his head back some more to watch the smoke puff out of her nose as she laughed with him

“No!” she protested, twisting a finger around one of Richie’s curls. “I mean you’re *better* than this place. You don’t belong here.”

“None of us belong in this hellhole, Bev,” Richie replied sourly, reaching up to pat Bev’s knee before holding his hand out for the joint.

Derry was its own universe; a dark, cavernous hole that people were dropped in and left to rot. Richie and his friends had always talked about getting out, of escaping as soon as they could, but sometimes Richie wasn’t even sure that was possible. Derry had the power to trap people there and hold them under a layer of complacency until they forgot they ever wanted to leave. Richie often thought he would be stuck there forever like his parents, unable to claw his way out and always followed by glowing eyes and moving shadows.

Richie shook the thoughts away and didn’t say any of this to Bev. Instead he stretched out with a groan, hearing his spine pop.

“Fuck, I am way too high for this conversation,” he muttered, and Beverly laughed as she patted down Richie’s hair, bringing him back to the present.

“You’re right though,” she said, crossing her ankles and wiggling her socked toes. “None of us belong here. We’re all going to get out of this shitty town and find where we’re meant to be.”

Richie knew he didn’t belong in Derry - no one did - but when he thought about where else he could go, he couldn’t imagine belonging anywhere else. He felt like he didn’t fit right in his own skin, like the growing pains he’d had when he was twelve had never gone away, like his body wasn’t his own. Most of his friends had plans for their futures, and Richie could easily picture all of them doing what they wanted to do and finally being happy with their lives, but when he thought of his own future he always came up blank.

It was only Richie and Eddie who hadn’t talked about their plans to leave yet. Richie was glad he wasn’t alone at least, but Eddie staying

was more to do with his overbearing mother and the fact she'd probably lock Eddie in a cage if he tried to go even ten minutes out of Derry. Richie knew Eddie would leave in a heartbeat if his mother would loosen the noose she had around his neck for even a fraction of a second. Richie, however, had no one stopping him but himself.

It was fine. He ignored it. He was an expert at pushing things he didn't want to think of away by now; he was seventeen and had plenty of time. He'd figure it out eventually. Maybe.

Except his friends were applying to college, and had spent most of their summer agonising over application forms and talking about dorm rooms and reading material. Richie just had a shitty part time job at the convenience store - the only perk being he managed to steal cigarettes every time he was on shift - and a half broken car he loved dearly, but absolutely nothing else to show for himself. Something under his skin itched and he squirmed uncomfortably, and he took another drag of the joint to try and stop his heart from hammering.

Richie heard Eddie before he saw him, complaining loudly to whoever he was with. The other person was listening and humming agreements, so Richie guessed it was Stan. Eddie and Stan had bonded first and foremost over their hatred for a lot of things, as well as their general annoyance when it came to Richie and his ability to make anything into a dirty joke. Richie wasn't exactly sure how he managed with two of his polar opposites as his closest friends. When he'd asked them, Stan had said they were there to cancel Richie's motormouth out, lamenting that it was a full time job. Richie would have been more offended if he wasn't aware of how many times Richie had talked himself into trouble, and how many of those times Stan and Eddie had managed to talk him back out of it.

"Holy shit, I thought someone had set the place on fire," Eddie shouted down the hatch of the clubhouse before climbing down, wafting away the smoke that had slowly clouded up the place over the past few hours.

Both Richie and Bev waved lazily in unison, and Eddie scoffed whilst Stan rolled his eyes.

"It's one in the afternoon, don't you two have anything better to do?" Eddie muttered, before striding over and sitting beside Richie, taking the joint out of his hand and taking a drag. He made the sourest face whenever he smoked with his friends, and always choked a little no matter how many times Richie had tried to teach him how to do it properly. It was like his body was rejecting it; his anxious mind fighting against him like it almost always was.

"Take a chill pill, man," Richie drawled in an exaggerated Cali accent that always somehow ended up sounding a little Australian too. Eddie elbowed Richie in the ribs but Richie could see him trying hard to hide his laugh.

Richie let his head drop onto Eddie's shoulder, body heavy and head feeling full of cotton wool as Stan perched himself in the hammock opposite them, swinging himself gently.

"So what are we doing today?" Stan asked. It was rare all seven of them were together at the same time now since most of them had jobs, but they'd made a deal to come down to the clubhouse whenever they were free in case anyone else was. Richie had spent way too many times sat in the clubhouse alone, waiting for someone else to show up. He hated how much it felt like a rejection even when he tried to convince himself it wasn't.

"This," Bev replied cheerfully, reaching down to snatch the joint from Eddie's fingers with a grin. Stan pulled a face, wrinkling his nose and mumbling something about how boring they all were. Stan smoked sometimes, but his father was like a police detective and could tell when Stan was even a little buzzed. Stan had said he was never punished exactly, but his father would always give him this disappointed look that made him want to shrivel up and die. Richie understood; Stan's father was a scary man when he wanted to be.

"This is better than sitting in the bushes staring at birds, Stanley," said Eddie, curling his fingers and holding them up to his eyes as if they were binoculars. Stan crossed his arms across his chest and glared.

"The only reason you didn't like it last time is because you fell in a pile of poison ivy," he retorted, looking smug when Eddie's face

dropped.

"I like bird watching!" Richie piped up, and both Stan and Eddie stared at him suspiciously.

"Getting to stare at tits all day? Who *wouldn't* like it?" Richie crowed before the others could interrupt his punchline. Both Eddie and Stan groaned, but Bev burst into shrill laughter that made Richie grin triumphantly.

"You're such a dick, Richie," Stan said, throwing a comic that had been left in the hammock at Richie's head and missing completely.

"Is a dick a kind of bird too? It would only be fair, right?" Richie shot back immediately, grin growing even wider. Stan levelled him with a completely blank look before giving him the finger.

They eventually made plans to go see a movie later, more to harass Ben than anything else, since they knew he was on shift at the kiosk that day. Their options of things to do were limited in Derry, especially now that they were older and the adventures they used to have didn't seem quite as adventurous anymore. Richie missed having sword fights with sticks and pretending they were on safari in the Barrens, building dams and playing hide and seek around the trees. He wondered if the others had the same ache when they thought about their childhood too. Probably not, since the majority of their childhood was spent running away from monsters.

"I know someone who's throwing a house party this weekend," Eddie piped up eventually, jostling Richie's head as he shrugged. "We could go to that?"

"You hate house parties," Stan said, puzzled, and Richie nodded.

"Yeah you do. What is it you always tell me when I ask you to come with me?" Richie pretended to look thoughtful for a moment before turning his head so that his chin was propped on Eddie's shoulder. "*They're a petri dish of bodily fluids and STD's, Richie* " Richie whined in a terrible imitation of Eddie's voice that always made the others laugh.

Eddie pushed Richie's head off his shoulder and told him to fuck off, glaring. Richie sniggered, immediately settling his head back down on Eddie's shoulder again and feeling smug when Eddie didn't protest.

Richie loved parties. They were too loud for him to think straight and he could always talk his way into getting free weed or booze from someone. There were plenty of people to laugh at his jokes, and no one asked him about his feelings or the future or any of the bullshit that had been plaguing his mind lately. Bill, Bev, and Ben almost always came with him - the rest of his friends usually declined.

Richie tuned back into the conversation to find Eddie was in the middle of a rant.

"And anyway, I don't *always* tell you that," Eddie snapped, prodding Richie in his leg. Eddie's voice turned quieter, softer, as he added. "It's probably our last few months all together, we should go to more parties, do normal kid stuff."

"*Normal kid stuff?* " Bev echoed. "You sound like my aunt trying to convince me to make friends with Greta Bowie." Even though he couldn't see her, Richie could picture the exact disgusted face Bev would be making.

Eddie threw his hands up in exasperation, knocking Richie's head off his shoulder for a second time. Richie grunted and moved to lay down, his vision starting to swim as he settled his head in Eddie's lap instead. Eddie froze for a couple of seconds and Richie worried distantly through his haze if he'd pushed it too far. All of Richie's friends were pretty tactile - they'd seen the best and worst of each other, and so they weren't shy about hugging or holding hands when they were together - but Richie hadn't missed Eddie's tenseness around him lately. Richie didn't know what it was about, and it was another thing he tried not to think too hard about. Just as Richie was about to move away with an apology and an excuse to do with being way too high, Eddie relaxed and slung an arm over Richie's middle to keep him there. Richie fought off the ridiculous urge to thank Eddie for not pushing him away, instead stretching his legs out and smiling to himself.

"I just wanted all of us to go to a party together," Eddie's voice was indignant, and Richie saw Bev pass the joint back to him like a peace offering.

"I'm in," Richie said, earning a grin from Eddie.

"Same here," said Bev, at the same time Stan nodded with a small smile.

Eddie and Bev immediately started excitedly making plans, Bev promising to get more weed and both of them convincing Richie to steal some liquor from his parents. As they talked, Eddie took Richie's wrist and pulled it towards him, looking at his nails.

"Why are your nails only half painted?" he asked, and Richie sniggered.

"Bev got too high to finish," he said, waving over to the small bottle of nail polish by his feet.

"He grew too many fingers. I couldn't keep up," Bev added, voice matter of fact. Richie laughed loudly, reaching over to squeeze her arm.

Eddie pushed at Richie to make him sit upright before leaning over to grab the bottle and dipping the brush into the pot of deep purple polish, turning so he and Richie were face to face. Eddie grabbed Richie's wrist with his free hand, squinting his eyes and poking his tongue out of his mouth in concentration as he started painting colour onto Richie's bare bitten down nails. Richie opened his mouth to make a comment about how Eddie should've asked for permission first but bit it back, settling for watching Eddie's ridiculous concentration face instead so that he could make fun of it later.

Bev had started painting Richie's nails a few years ago to try and stop him from biting them so much. It never worked - Richie's nails were always bitten down to nubs - but he liked having his nails painted, so he kept asking Bev to paint them for him. He usually had them in alternating clashing colours, and they always had chips in the paint where he'd picked at them, but he liked it that way. Bev was more than happy to do Richie's nails whenever he asked, and had even

bought him his own bottles for his birthday last year.

(Richie went a step further once and wanted to try wearing eyeliner like Bev did sometimes, but he ended up poking himself in the eye with the pencil and vowed never to try it again, no matter how good it might have looked.)

“Eddie’s terrible at painting your nails, you’re going to end up with it all over your hands,” Stan warned, and Eddie stopped to give Stan the finger.

“I’m *amazing* at this,” Eddie protested, almost going cross eyed as he stared down at Richie’s fingers, then swearing loudly when he slipped and painted Richie’s knuckle instead. Richie didn’t need to look at Stan to know exactly how smug his expression would be.

Richie just lifted his hand and rubbed the nail polish off on his shirt, leaving a purple streak on his chest.

“Want me to do yours after?” he asked Eddie, who cursed again when Richie moved and the paint slipped onto his thumb.

“Fuck no, your hands are way too wobbly,” Eddie replied, not taking his eyes off of Richie’s fingers. Bev offered to do Eddie’s instead, but Eddie just shook his head, mouth a tight line.

They’d painted Eddie’s nails once, when they were fifteen. He’d asked for Bev to paint them red after seeing Richie’s electric blue nails, and Richie could still picture his delighted grin when they were done. Eddie’s mother had seen them when he got home and had put him on house arrest for two weeks, not even letting him come to school. Eddie never asked to have his nails painted again, and Richie was reminded all over again of just how much he hated Eddie’s mother.

Eddie was smiling now though, chatting away to Bev and Stan as he carefully painted Richie’s nails, and Richie slumped against the chair again, shutting his eyes and resting his head against Bev’s knee.

Richie might not belong in the town of Derry, but he never felt like he belonged more than when he was surrounded by his friends, hearing them laugh and letting their voices wash over him. A sudden

jolt of sadness passed over him, like he was mourning for his friends before he'd even lost them. Richie would never get friends like these again, he knew it. They'd been through so much together - shared something no one else could possibly understand. They were family, and Richie loved them all so much that it hurt.

It felt like there was a countdown over their heads now, like they were fading away from Derry and from each other. Everyone kept swearing they'd keep in touch when they moved away, but when they said it their smiles didn't reach their eyes, like they knew it wasn't true. Richie's chest ached just thinking about it.

"Hey," Eddie's voice made Richie come back to the present. He was looking at Richie with concern plastered across his face, and Richie noticed the other two were staring at him as well, then he realised his hands were shaking.

"You good?" Eddie asked, voice soft. It took Richie a few moments to rearrange his face into a smile, but he gave Eddie the most convincing grin he could before he nodded.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he said cheerfully, and if the others heard the wobble in his voice, they didn't comment on it.

"You were quiet. You're never quiet," Stan interjected before Eddie could speak again. Bev giggled from her seat.

"Sorry pals, I was too busy thinking about nailing Eddie's mom last-" Richie began loudly, and Eddie quickly moved the bottle of polish out of the way so that he could slap his hand over Richie's mouth to muffle whatever else he was going to say.

"Shut the fuck *up*, oh my god," Eddie snapped, but he was twisting his mouth in the way that told Richie he was trying hard not to laugh along with the others.

Richie batted Eddie's hand away, retaliating by reaching forward and pinching Eddie's cheek with a grin, ending up smudging nail polish all over Eddie's face as he did. Eddie squawked and swore at Richie, complaining the whole time he redid three of Richie's fingers. Richie didn't stop grinning, and no one had to know that he was twitching

his fingers on purpose to make Eddie slip up so they'd stay as they were for a while longer.

The painful feeling of loss was squashed down before Richie could think about it too hard; it had been drowned out by the laughter of his friends, but he knew it hadn't gone completely. Richie could feel it looming, tucked neatly in between his shoulder blades as a constant reminder that none of this would last forever.

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Watching movies was still one of Richie's most favourite things to do. He went off horror movies for a while - for obvious reasons - but that hadn't lasted long. He loved how watching films made him feel, how the sound and colour surrounded him completely and took him somewhere else, making him feel like he was on a different planet when he walked out of the theatre.

Richie was practically bouncing down the street as they made their way to the Aladdin. Bev, Eddie, Stan, and Richie had picked up Bill on their way - partly because they hadn't seen him in a while, and partly because they needed him to settle the argument of what they were going to watch.

"I'm not watching a fucking romance movie," Richie insisted for the fifteenth time. "They all go the same. Super hot guy gets super hot girl, it's *boring*."

"Oh, and watching a movie you've already seen twice *isn't* boring?" Eddie shot back. "And it's not a romance movie, it's an action movie."

Richie snorted. "No, it's a romance movie *disguised* as an action movie, and those are the worst."

"I want to see the romance movie," Stan piped up, then when Eddie pulled a face at him, added "Action movie. Whatever. I just don't want to have to live through another two weeks of Richie trying to

copy the voices from that other movie again.”

“I’m with Richie,” Bev said, and Richie whooped and danced around the other two to high five her.

“It’s like our first date all over again,” Richie crooned, making Bev giggle. She linked her arm around Richie’s and marched them both ahead, away from the others as they heard Eddie scoff.

“In what lifetime did you two go on a *date*? ” he called to them, and Richie spun him and Bev around to grin at him.

“Are you jealous?” he asked, making Bev laugh harder and Eddie scowl.

Bev patted at Richie’s hand linked around her arm. “He was the perfect gentleman. Paid for my ticket *and* for ice cream after,” she said proudly. Richie dusted off his knuckles on his shirt, looking smug.

“Ben was there too,” he added. “So I had *two* dates that day.”

“Nope,” Stan said. “You were a third wheel on Bev and Ben’s date.”

“Definitely a third wheel,” Eddie nodded solemnly.

“D-d-definitely,” Bill agreed, grinning.

Bev was collapsed into Richie’s side laughing as Richie scowled at his friends.

“You’re all just jealous you haven’t had your chance to get a piece of this,” Richie told them all, waving his free hand down his body and making them all sigh loudly.

“Sure, that’s what it is. Can we go and see a movie now?” Stan replied tiredly.

“We still haven’t decided what we’re going to see,” Bev pointed out, setting off another chorus of sighs.

Bill held his finger up. “W-wh-why d-don’t we get Buh-Ben to

surprise us?”

“Because he’s a hopeless romantic who will definitely pick the shitty romance film!” Richie protested, but he was outnumbered by the others agreeing.

When they got to the theatre Richie immediately collapsed himself over the desk to stare longingly at Ben, who was already shaking his head.

“I know what you’re going to ask, and no, Richie, I can’t-” he began, but Richie interrupted with a whine.

“Ben, *please*. I promise I’ll be good, I promise you won’t get in trouble, I *promise* I will blame it all on Eddie if we get caught.”

“Hey!” Eddie yelled, punching Richie in the shoulder.

“Last time you said that you started making shadow puppets in front of the projector. I can’t let you guys into the projection room again, I’ll get in trouble,” Ben’s face was twisted up like he couldn’t bear to be saying no to Richie, and Richie should have felt bad, but he also knew how much he could use Ben’s desperate need to please his friends to his advantage.

“Mrs Bowen *loves* you, even if she found you sleeping on the job or stealing popcorn she’d just pinch your cheeks and tell you what a lovely boy you are,” Richie slipped into his impression of the elderly lady who ran the cinema, and even though Ben was still making a pained face, Richie managed to get a laugh out of him

“I don’t want to go in the projection room,” Stan interjected. “I want to watch the movie like a normal person.”

Bill agreed with Stan with a nod, and Richie lamented about how boring his friends were.

“I kind of want to see what it’s like watching from up there,” Bev piped up, and Richie’s grin turned maniacal. Having Bev on his side made it way too easy to convince Ben to do pretty much anything.

Ben agreed eventually, slipping the keys over to Richie with a long

sigh whilst Richie did a ridiculous victory dance. Ben gave them all tickets to see the romance movie along with the keys, and Richie couldn't even be mad about it.

It took Eddie a solid ten minutes to decide whether he was going to follow Bev and Richie or Stan and Bill.

"You loved the projection room last time we went up there!" Richie said for the third time whilst Eddie paced from side to side and the others watched tiredly.

"Yeah but last time you also nearly broke the projector, *and* we nearly got caught," Eddie retorted.

Stan was pinching the bridge of his nose, and Bill looked like he was seriously regretting agreeing to go with them to watch a movie.

"Fine, go with the boring people who have no sense of adventure," Richie shrugged, grabbing Bev's wrist and making his way up the stairs.

The projection room was tiny. It was just a dusty cupboard lined with shelves and with a clunky projector in the middle. It was Ben's job to start the movies off but he'd taught Richie how to do it when Richie had hung out with him on his shift once. Richie set the film up, giving a weak cheer when the screen below them flickered and lit up as the reel began to run.

Richie and Bev had to stand to watch in the room, peering out through the window panel which Bev still wasn't quite tall enough to see over. Richie grabbed two crates off of the shelves and set one down for Bev to stand on, and then set another down in between them both.

"For Eddie, when he makes his mind up," Richie explained.

Sure enough Eddie snuck into the room right as the film started to play, stepping up on the crate beside Richie and pressing his palms up against the glass. When Richie opened his mouth to speak, Eddie immediately turned to glare at him, holding his finger up to his mouth.

"Say one word and I'm leaving," Eddie snapped. Richie pretended to zip up his mouth, but couldn't help but look a little smug, too.

Richie loved the movie - though he'd sooner die before he told anyone that - so he complained loudly about how boring it had been all the way home.

He was in the middle of another impression of the male lead which was making even Stan laugh when Eddie nudged into his side and gave him a knowing look.

"I know you loved the movie," he whispered into Richie's ear. "I saw you. You cried at the end."

Richie turned to glare at Eddie who was grinning delightedly, then he zipped up his mouth like Richie had done in the projection room, making Richie relent and grin back at him. Bev appeared on Richie's other side, grabbing Richie's hand and joining in with complaining about the film as Stan, Bill, and Eddie argued with them.

Richie wished - not for the first time - that he could bottle up what he was feeling in this moment to keep for when he needed it. He was getting washed away in waves of bad feeling more often than not lately, and he thought if he could hold onto this bubble of joy that surrounded his friends at times like these it would make it a lot easier to get out of the sadness that was trying to drown him.

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Richie wasn't a good sleeper. Sometimes he couldn't sleep because of that electricity thrumming under his skin that made his legs shake and his head throb. It got worse on a night time, as if someone had turned the volume on a stereo up and up until it was nothing but vibrations and white noise. He didn't mind that so much, he'd learned how to waste his time making mixtapes for the clubhouse, re-reading the comics Stan had leant him that he'd never given back, and watching reruns of terrible old black and white movies that only

ever played in the early hours of the morning. He could pass the time easily until he finally would crash out from pure exhaustion and fall into a dreamless sleep as the sun rose.

But then there was another kind of sleepless nights, where whenever he shut his eyes shadows began surrounding him, swallowing him whole and dragging him back to the house on Neibolt where he could hear his friend's cries, begging him to help them. It had been years now, but he could still smell the dust and grime of that house, hear the floorboards creak under his feet as he walked, and feel the way his heart felt like it was going to burst out of his chest with fear.

He'd keep himself awake those nights, sometimes for a few days after too, just until he felt safe enough to stop looking over his shoulder.

When the night of the party came around Richie hadn't slept in two days, and he couldn't wait to drink and smoke until his brain was numb. He knew that it wasn't a particularly healthy coping mechanism, but he figured he got a free pass considering his nightmares were very real and currently buried somewhere deep below his feet.

"Richie, look where you're going!" Bev yelled, laughing loudly when Richie stumbled over a curb and Mike saved him by grabbing his arm and holding on tight. Bev was already drunk since she, Richie, and Eddie had met up an hour before to share a bottle of vodka.

"You're even less coordinated than you usually are," Mike joked, giving Richie's arm a gentle squeeze.

"Only because I know you'll catch me, darlin'," Richie simpered, batting his eyelashes at Mike who just laughed even harder. Mike kept hold of Richie's arm for a little while longer, watching Richie carefully as they walked. Richie was at least half convinced Mike could read minds at this point, so he tried his best to keep a smile on his face, pretending he couldn't feel Mike's eyes on him.

"It's Eddie and Mike's first proper house party!" Bev cheered, holding up what was left of the bottle of vodka they had shared. Ben, Stan, Richie, and Bill all did an enthusiastic round of applause. Mike did a bow, smiling, and Eddie crossed his arms across his chest with a

huff.

“It’s not my first house party,” he argued.

“Yeah but at your *actual* first party, you ended up in the bathroom all night because some girl threw up on your shoes,” Stan pointed out with a smirk, making Eddie scowl.

Eddie was pretty good - all things considered - with the whole germ thing now most of the time; or he at least tried his best to be. But even Richie had been grossed out when a girl had bumped into Eddie at their last group party and promptly spewed neon pink vomit all over his shoes and pants. Eddie had waddled his way upstairs to pull off his pants and shoes, cursing and shaking whilst Stan and Richie had followed, trying to stop him from having a panic attack. Richie had taken his own pants and shoes off and given them to Eddie to wear without a second thought, and he ended up walking Eddie home wearing nothing but his shirt and a pair of boxers whilst Eddie had shuffled beside him in clothes that were at least three sizes too big.

The next day Eddie told the story of how his mother had thought he’d shrunk because of the clothes he came home wearing. She’d had been inconsolable and almost ended up calling an ambulance, insisting Eddie would shrink into nothing. Richie had laughed so hard he’d cried.

Richie’s grin got wider as they walked closer to the house, the music already reaching his ears and settling into his bones. A laugh bubbled up from his chest when Bev grabbed Stan and Ben’s hands before running into the house with them whooping and cheering, and Bill and Mike followed them closely behind. Eddie hung back with Richie, and just before they caught up Eddie stepped in front of Richie, blocking his view of the open doorway.

“Richie, are you ok?” Eddie asked. He had a furrow between his eyebrows as he watched Richie carefully, and Richie shuddered under his stare.

A flash of a memory suddenly came to Richie’s head of Eddie screaming, of claws and tears and broken bones, and Richie had to

clear his throat a few times to get his words out.

“I’ll be so much better when I get another drink,” Richie said in a made up voice that even he didn’t recognise. His too-wide smile felt like it was cracking his face open, so he ducked his head and grabbed Eddie’s wrist instead, trying to pull him inside.

Eddie just dug his heels in, and Richie turned back to him with a sigh.

“Eds, I’m fine. I’m just tired, ok?” Richie said, running his free hand through his hair. Memories came back in sparks sometimes, sending shocks of horror through Richie’s body before leaving as quickly as they’d come. He almost wanted to ask the others if it happened to them too, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

Eddie eventually relented, nodding and letting Richie lead him into the house, but the crease between his eyebrows didn’t go away.

*

As Richie and Eddie walked through the house a few people waved over to Richie and he flashed them a grin as he made a beeline for the kitchen. Those people weren’t his friends, they were just strangers he’d found at parties from before. They liked him because he was funny, and he liked them because they laughed at his jokes and knew absolutely nothing about him.

Richie caught a glimpse of a face that was a little bit too familiar; blonde hair and blue eyes and a smirk that made Richie go cold. The guy spotted Richie before Richie could turn away, and his face dropped into a scowl.

The guy - Richie realised he didn’t even know his name, for fucks sake - was a couple of years older than Richie, but had only moved to Derry last year. For two months at every single party, Richie had found himself with this guy, both of them drunk out of their minds and making out in the corner of a dark bedroom or behind a locked

bathroom door. Richie had known it was a terrible idea, but he'd just wanted to make sense of what he was feeling, and he didn't exactly have tons of other options jumping out at him. Making out with a random guy secretly at gross parties was the best he could do when it came to figuring out if he liked that or not.

Richie realised he wasn't exactly straight when he was fifteen, as if he needed more shit to deal with on top of a murderous fucking demon clown. If he really thought about it, he'd probably known for much longer, but fifteen was when it really came along and punched him in the nuts.

He'd dated a couple of girls - though it was less *dated*, and more they used him as a making out partner until actual boyfriend material came along, which Richie was fine with - and he liked girls a lot. But then he realised he felt pretty much the same way about guys too, and it wasn't just that he liked their outfits or their hairstyles like he always insisted to his friends. He got crushes on guys too. Richie was unapologetic about who he was most of the time. He was loud and obnoxious, he never wore clothes that matched, and he made sure people knew that he didn't care what they thought about him as much as he could. That wasn't the truth at all, but Richie wanted other people to think it was, and he'd got that down to a fine art.

He hadn't been prepared for the white hot stab of shame he felt when he realised he was into guys. Turns out that years of Bowers kicking the shit out of him whilst making sure Richie knew exactly how *disgusting* and *wrong* he was can wear a guy down. Richie's not so sure if the shame was for who he is or how he felt about it.

So Richie stayed quiet, he made out with girls at parties, and he shut the rest of himself away in a little box, chained up and tucked away in a hole in his chest. It hurt, sometimes, but Richie was an expert at hiding things away, of repressing nightmares and horrors. This was just another horror to add to the list.

Then he'd found this guy, a guy who grabbed his wrist and pulled him somewhere secret so that he could get his hands on him, and Richie had liked it more than he'd ever admit. The shame never left, and it was always the worst after those kinds of hookups, especially since every time the guy would grab Richie by the scruff of his shirt

before he left and tell him the same thing:

“If you tell anyone about this, you’re dead.”

Richie would nod and slink out of the room because he didn’t want anyone to know either, but even still at every party he’d go seeking out that familiar face, buzzing with something just a little too sharp to be excitement.

Richie was the one to call it off eventually after they almost got caught and Richie decided it wasn’t worth being threatened every weekend by a guy who’d just been sucking his face.

The guy wasn’t even his type anyway. Too tall. Too blonde.

Richie had questions about his attraction to guys, and he’d gotten his answers. So at the next party when the guy had grabbed his wrist and jerked his head towards the bedroom door, Richie had shook his head and went to find his friends instead.

He’d almost told his friends about his sexuality a few times. He figured Bev had kind of figured it out, but they’d never talked about it, and he’d half began telling Stan a year ago before he choked and changed the subject. He’d even written a letter to Eddie once, too. Richie was terrible with words when it really mattered, and when he was younger his mother had convinced him to start writing his feelings down in a journal, insisting it would help. One day Richie tore out a page and began writing to Eddie, all about the guy at the party and how he wanted to kiss boys as well as girls, about his feelings and how he couldn’t make sense of them but he was trying his best.

He’d torn it up and flushed it down the toilet the second he finished it, deciding his friends never needed to know.

His friends loved him, he knew that, but he’d heard all of the insults before, he’d felt the hate radiating off people in this town, like an infectious disease. His friends loved him, but ingrained hate was just as strong as love, and he didn’t want to risk losing the people he loved the most.

Richie tore his eyes away from the guy, shrugging it off and instead moved his hand down from where it was wrapped around Eddie's wrist to grab his hand instead, because the place was packed with people and he knew Eddie wasn't keen on crowds. Eddie gave his hand a grateful squeeze in return, and Richie smiled to himself. Eddie was drunk enough to not care they were holding hands in front of people, and it helped Richie shake off the icy feeling from the glares the other guy was shooting him.

He spotted Bev sat on the stairs next to a girl he recognised from his English class. She winked at him as he passed, and he blew her a kiss in return. Stan and Mike were huddled up on a couch together to his left, talking quietly to each other as if they weren't at a party with music so loud it made Richie's whole body shake. Richie stopped dead when he spotted Bill, causing Eddie to crash into him with a grunt, and it took a few seconds of Eddie following Richie's eyeline before he could work out what Richie had began laughing so hard at. Bill had been practically cornered by a girl who was twirling her hair around her fingers and batting her eyelashes at Bill as she played with the hem of his shirt. Bill's body was rigid, eyes darting around the room and his shoulders up around his ears - Richie had never seen Bill look so out of his depth.

Eddie started laughing with Richie, and despite the music Richie could hear Eddie's laughter loud and clear. They grinned at each other for a moment before they kept on moving, but not before Richie caught Bill's eye and saluted him, still laughing. Bill just glared back.

Ben was already in the kitchen and Richie cheered and ran at him, placing a smacking kiss on the top of his head. It was a little quieter in the kitchen, a little cooler than the rest of the house, and Richie didn't miss Eddie's small sigh of relief.

"What'll it be, fellas?" Richie asked, holding up two different bottles of liquor. He began swinging one of the bottles, thinking about flipping it to see if he could catch it like he'd seen the fancy bartenders do in movies. As if he'd read his mind, Eddie snatched the bottle off Richie with a warning glare.

"Both?" Ben answered quietly, and Richie threw his hands up in the

air with another cheer.

"I like your thinking, Haystack!" he grinned, grabbing the bottle back off Eddie and pouring out three shots each from the two bottles. Ben took one glass, Richie took another, and Eddie stared at his own as if it was going to bite him.

"Come on Eds, you're such a wuss," Richie teased. Eddie's face immediately darkened and he grabbed one of the glasses, downing the drink quickly whilst giving Richie the finger.

"Don't call me that," Eddie choked out, trying and failing not to wince at the drinks taste.

Richie just slung his arm around Eddie's neck whilst he threw his own drink back, ignoring the sharp elbow to his stomach.

Ben, Eddie, and Richie ended up sitting on the floor of the kitchen, all with their own bottles of liquor they'd stolen from the back of the cabinets. Eddie was cradling his bottle like a baby, eyes glazed and back slumped against Richie's side, and Ben had his head on Richie's opposite shoulder.

"Well, we're officially those losers at a party who sit on their own and don't talk to anyone else," Richie pointed out with a small laugh. He didn't mind at all, really. This would probably go down in history as one of his favourite parties, especially since he could hear Bev laughing just outside of the kitchen, and because Eddie has his head lolled back against Richie's shoulder, grinning up at him.

"Not everyone is a mouthy little shit who could make friends with a telephone post," Eddie retorted, reaching up to pat Richie's cheek, but missing and poking Richie in the nose instead.

"I'm fine with being a loser," Ben said, "I like you guys best anyway."

Both Richie and Eddie let out a chorus of 'awws' and Richie pressed another kiss on top of Ben's head, ruffling his hair.

Eddie mumbled something about the bathroom, struggling his way to his feet, and Richie had to catch him a couple of times when he

almost fell back down. His face was flushed and his hair was sticking up in every direction, but he was still clinging onto his bottle like a lifeline.

“You’re not going to spew, are you?” Richie asked, trying to pull himself up so that he could follow Eddie who shook his head and pushed Richie back down.

“I’ll be fine, *mom*. I just need to pee.” muttered Eddie, batting Richie away.

“Be safe, Eddie-bear! Mind those terrible germs darling!” Richie screamed after Eddie. He figured he’d pretty much nailed Eddie’s mother’s voice after years of making fun of her, though Eddie would definitely disagree. Eddie flipped Richie off again as he walked away, but Richie could see his shoulders shaking with laughter anyway.

Richie stretched his legs out, shoes squeaking on the tile, and Ben sighed to himself, tapping his fingernails on the glass bottle in his lap.

From where Richie and Ben were sat they could see through the doorway, and they could see Bev and Mike dancing together in the hall with Stan and Bill leant against the wall laughing at them.

“Man, I’m really going to miss you guys,” Ben said wistfully. Richie choked on his drink and had to cough a few times to clear the lump in his throat. He hated how much this was all getting to him lately - he blamed it on the lack of sleep.

“Don’t worry, we’ll all be in your sexiest of wet dreams,” Richie crooned, patting Ben’s leg. He wasn’t exactly sure which voice he had been going for so it sounded like a garbled mix of three. Ben laughed anyway and Richie loved him for it.

Richie hadn’t known Ben for as long as some of the others, but he still loved him just as much. Ben was endlessly kind and always entertained Richie’s ridiculous ideas or absurd theories. One of Richie’s favourite memories was when Ben had brought him into the library, helping him grab stacks of books filled with reported UFO sightings and theories of life on other planets just because Richie had

said he thought aliens existed and the rest of his friends had shot him down.

“I’m gonna be the new kid all over again at college,” Ben said glumly. Richie’s heart ached at the thought.

Ben was smart and always nice to everyone - too nice, in Richie’s opinion - but he was also kind of a loner. He’d just been lucky in Derry that there were six other kids who were loners like him. Richie couldn’t imagine the group without Ben in; he always laughed at Richie’s jokes, knew exactly how to cheer Bev up, humoured both Eddie and Stan’s rants that went on way too many tangents, and brought Mike and Bill their own mixtapes every week once he found out they only ever listened to the same music as their parents.

Ben had built them a clubhouse, just because he wanted to, because he could. Everyone needed a friend like Ben, they just didn’t know it.

“You survived being the new kid in *Derry*, Haystack, you can survive it anywhere,” Richie said, prodding at Ben’s stomach with a pointed look, and Ben conceded with a nod. Ben had been thrown straight in the deep end with Bowers picking him for target practice, and then onto the clown that made Bowers seem like a dream. Richie’s friends had seen the worst of everything - he was pretty sure they could conquer the world if they wanted to.

Richie spotted Eddie coming back, scowling at a couple making out on the stairs as he passed them gingerly. He could almost hear the rant he was about to hear about people making out in inconvenient places. *Can they suck face somewhere that’s not a fucking death trap?*

“Are you proud of Eddie for getting into med school in New York?” Ben asked as he watched Eddie too, and Richie felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water all over him.

“He *what?*” Richie replied, his voice cracking.

Ben turned to look at Richie and his face dropped when he saw his expression.

“Shit Richie, you didn’t know?”

Richie shook his head dumbly. There was a whooshing noise in his ears, and his head was pounding. He saw Eddie come back into the kitchen out of the corner of his eye, and his stomach lurched.

“I’m sure he was going to-” Ben began, but Richie was already up on his feet and stumbling out of the back door, ignoring Ben’s shouted apologies and Eddie calling him back.

The back garden was filled with people who had spilled out from the house, and Richie pushed his way through them to get out of the gate so that he could slump against the wall at the side of the house, trying to catch his breath.

Richie had spent plenty of nights by himself in his room alone watching the hours tick by, but in this moment with sound pouring out of the party still in the house and chatter surrounding him, he had never felt more lonely.

Eddie and Richie were always a package deal. Where Eddie went, Richie would go too. After It turned their lives upside down, Richie for a while had felt like all the others tried to forget, tried to go on as normal, and most of the time were succeeding. Richie, however, was stuck in a tailspin, going over all the different things that could have happened to him and his friends, and had been constantly having visions of each of them dying in front of him. It had often felt like he’d already died in those sewers, and now he was rotting from the inside out whilst everything around him carried on as normal

Richie had only managed three days of hiding away from his friends back then when Eddie had appeared at his door. He’d given a rambled explanation that he’d had to sneak out of his house to get there before dragging Richie into a hug so tight that it made his bones grind together a little.

“We don’t try to deal with this alone,” Eddie had said, face defiant. “We stick together, right?”

A stupid part of Richie figured that would last forever.

Eddie found Richie eventually sat outside of the house in the dark, back against the wall with his knees tucked up to his chest. He made a little noise that sounded like a sob as he sat down beside Richie and shuffled as close as he could get.

“Richie,” Eddie’s voice sounded like he was pleading, “Stop being so fucking weird and tell me what’s wrong so I can help.”

Eddie would always carry around packs full of bandaids and hand sanitizer for his friends when they were younger. He was like walking first aid kit, Richie used to joke, as Eddie rubbed gel that stung onto Richie’s scraped knees, or threw over a bottle of aloe to Bill when he got sunburned. Eddie patched them up, he always did, and even now they were older Richie knew Eddie still carried a pack of bandaids with him just in case. He wanted to help people - his friends, especially - and he’d always been so good at it, even if he did tell Richie how much of an idiot he was whilst he cleaned up his cuts.

God, he’d really miss Eddie the most.

“A band-aid won’t fix this one, Eds,” Richie said, tapping his head. He had meant it as a joke, but it had come out a little too weak.

Richie looked over to Eddie who was watching him carefully, the crease on his forehead back again. He smelled of booze and that awful toothpaste he used that tasted like liquorice, and he was shivering a little bit, having left his coat inside with Ben. Richie pulled his own coat off and dumped it on Eddie’s head.

“You’re gonna freeze to death, dipshit,” Richie muttered.

“I’m not the one who’s been sat out here in the cold for fucking ages,” Eddie retorted, but put Richie’s jacket on anyway, pulling the sleeves over his knuckles.

Richie didn’t know how to deal with this. He knew he was being unreasonable, that his friends wanting to get out of this town was normal, especially after everything they’d had to deal with there. It wasn’t just the clown either, it was the kids in school who would shove them against lockers and spit venomous words in their faces, the adults who barely even acknowledged them, and the empty

streets that lead to nowhere. Richie should be so happy for Eddie - and he was - but that was overpowered by a bitter feeling that was like the aftertaste of a pill that had gotten stuck in his throat.

When they'd been in Neibolt, when Richie had seen Eddie wailing as the clown gripped his arm and bared its teeth, edging closer, Richie was sure Eddie was going to die. Even before it happened Richie had felt the bone crushing, devastating grief that was to come. His world without Eddie in it was cold and dark and *wrong*, and Richie wasn't sure he could've handled that.

Eddie nudged Richie's side, and Richie tried not to flinch. "Are you going to talk to me, or are you just going to sit out here looking miserable all night?"

"There's nothing to talk about," Richie muttered, shifting away from Eddie. He didn't know how to deal with this. There were too many voices in his head all telling him different things and pulling him in different directions.

"Well all I know is you stormed out of a party and Ben wouldn't tell me shit, then I find you sat out here freezing to death. So there's definitely *something*," Eddie's voice was getting faster and higher, like it always did when he was pissed off or upset. Richie smiled a little despite himself.

"You got me," Richie said with a sigh, throwing his hands up. "Me and my girlfriend broke up and I'm heartbroken."

Eddie went dead silent for a few moments, before he started to shout.

"Your *girlfriend*? You had a *girlfriend*? "

"That's what I said."

"Who's your girlfriend?" Eddie demanded.

"Oh, did your mom not tell you we were dating?" Richie asked, turning to Eddie with a grin and immediately earning a punch to the shoulder.

“Fuck you,” Eddie grumbled. Richie always imagined Eddie would be like those cartoon characters who had steam coming out of their ears when they got mad. Usually he couldn’t help but laugh a little bit at Richie too. This time, he didn’t.

“Can you be serious for, like, half a second?” Eddie sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. Richie’s smile dropped.

He couldn’t avoid it forever, he supposed.

“Were you just planning to keep New York a secret until you scampered off there?” Richie’s voice cracked on almost every word, and he hauled himself to his feet to put more space between him and Eddie, feeling like he had hands around his throat that were slowly getting tighter.

Eddie seemed to go through the whole spectrum of emotion. His jaw dropped, then his face scrunched up, lip wobbling as he went pale, and Richie would have laughed at him if he wasn’t so miserable.

“Richie, I-” Eddie began, but Richie cut him off.

“I’m happy for you Eds, really. I hope it’s everything you ever wanted,” Richie’s voice didn’t sound like his own, and he gave a smile that felt wrong even to him. Eddie started running his hand through his hair and tugging slightly, like he always did when he was upset.

“I meant to tell you, I just-” Eddie started again, but Richie didn’t want to hear it.

“When do you go?” he interrupted, voice so quiet he wasn’t sure Eddie would be able to hear him.

“Couple of months,” Eddie replied, and Richie’s heart felt like it had stammered to a stop, sinking down to his feet.

Richie thought he and Eddie would have forever, so a few months felt like seconds to him. Richie laughed, a hollow sound, and threw his hands up in defeat.

“Glad I found out from Ben then before you disappeared without telling me, then,” there was no bite to Richie’s tone, but Eddie flinched anyway.

Richie just shook his head and turned away before Eddie could say anything else, curling his hands into fists so tightly his nails dug into his palms, and set off walking into the darkness of the street.

*

Richie had been walking around the streets of Derry for two hours and he was pretty sure he had frostbite. He didn’t want to go home to spend another sleepless night staring at his ceiling, but he had nowhere else to go. All of his friends were still at the party, had no doubt spoken to Eddie by now, and would definitely think Richie was being unreasonable.

It was selfish, how Richie was feeling, and he knew it. There’d been a point after the clown when all of his friends were suffering, still sleeping with the lights on or jumping at any noise louder than a whisper, where Richie wanted to scoop them all up and send them far away from Derry and all the memories that came with it. But they’d gotten through it, they’d grown up and got back to normal again - or as normal as any of them could possibly be. They’d carved out safe spaces for themselves that Richie would have been more than happy to stay in forever, but now it felt like that safety was crumbling under his feet all over again.

Eddie himself, most of all, made Richie feel safe, seen - like he belonged. The crawling under Richie’s skin and the buzzing in his head that was almost always there calmed around Eddie, made Richie feel like he fit in his skin just a little bit more than usual.

Richie remembered talking about Eddie with Bev once, one of the first times they’d smoked weed together.

“You love him,” Bev had said sagely with a nod, making Richie choke

on his inhale.

"I don't *love* him. He's a bossy little turd who's always yelling at me," Richie argued in between coughs.

Bev had laughed loudly, and took Richie's free hand. "That's not true and you know it. You think Eddie hung the moon, and the fact he calls you out on your bullshit is one of your favourite things about him." Bev squeezed Richie's hand. "He's your favourite person and your best friend. You're allowed to love him, you know."

Bev had winked at Richie and left it there, never mentioning it again. Richie wasn't sure if it was that she'd forgotten or that she'd gotten the hint that Richie couldn't talk about it - either way, he was grateful. When Richie thought back, he figured Bev probably meant *love* in the way he loved the rest of his friends and how they loved him back, since Richie was the one most likely to cover any of his actual emotions with dumb jokes. But in a haze of smoke and his own thoughts, it had struck a deeper chord with Richie.

Because Bev had been right, even if she didn't realise quite how right. Richie was *in* love with Eddie, and probably had been since they were eleven years old, before he knew what that word even meant. It wasn't a sudden, shocking revelation, but more something warm and comfortable that crept up on him slowly, engulfing him. It wasn't like when Richie had realised he was into guys; there was no dread or fear, and the two didn't connect in his mind at all. Being into guys and being into Eddie weren't mutually exclusive in Richie's mind, because loving Eddie felt like a given to him, like an inevitability. Eddie was Richie's best friend before anything else and Richie would never want that to change, so he stayed quiet. It didn't eat away at him so much anymore, but it was always there, and Richie never really wanted it to leave anyway - it was a part of him now. Sometimes he wondered if Eddie knew, like when he would go rigid if Richie pulled him into a hug, or he'd catch Richie staring at him for a little too long. Richie tried his best to keep it under wraps but it was an almost impossible thing to hide, especially when his heart felt like it was way too big for his chest whenever he was around Eddie.

Maybe if he'd have known Eddie was going to leave, he'd have spent the summer that had just passed differently - savouring it more. He

felt like he'd wasted so much time not spending it with Eddie, even though they'd seen each other almost every day. It had a different weight to it now he knew his and Eddie's time together was about to run out.

Maybe Richie would have spent more time trying to convince himself to tell Eddie how he really felt. Probably not.

Richie hadn't realised he'd walked to Eddie's house until he was standing at the front gate, and he groaned, cursing himself. Eddie's bedroom light was on, meaning he'd already gotten home in time for his mom's curfew, and Richie's heart stuttered a little when he walked closer and realised Eddie had left the window open a crack despite the cold.

Richie had been climbing into Eddie's bedroom through the window since they were ten years old. Mrs K had always been like a prison warden, so Richie had to get inventive if he wanted to see Eddie more than just at school. The room was easy enough to climb up to and Richie had become an expert at it, except for the one time he slipped and broke his ankle. He'd had to knock on the front door and spout some bullshit to Eddie's mother about falling off his bike outside just so she would take him to a hospital. Eddie had banned him from trying to climb through the window for three weeks - instead sneaking out of his house to go to Richie's instead so he could keep Richie company whilst he was housebound.

As if Eddie had a sixth sense, he looked out of the window right as Richie was about to turn around and walk away, and Richie groaned again.

Before Eddie could speak, Richie wrapped his arms around himself and hunched over, refusing to meet Eddie's eyes.

"I just came to pick up my jacket," he called up to the window. He didn't miss how Eddie's face dropped.

Eddie was still wearing the jacket, so unzipped it and dangled it out of the window, but before he dropped it down he changed his mind, hauling himself out of the window instead and beginning to climb down.

“What are you *doing*? Go the hell back to bed, moron,” Richie hissed, sighing loudly as Eddie ignored him, making his way down to the ground.

Eddie reached the floor and crossed his arms, mirroring Richie’s expression almost exactly.

“We need to talk,” he said, and Richie shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Not right now,” he mumbled.

“Yes right now, you stubborn shit,” Eddie insisted. “Richie, I told everyone else about New York, but I couldn’t tell you.”

Richie sighed, trying to ignore the ache in his chest. So he was the last to know, like he’d thought. He wasn’t happy about Eddie going away, but he wished he could have shared Eddie’s excitement with him when he’d gotten his acceptance letter. He could picture Eddie’s beaming smile perfectly, and Richie was sad he missed seeing it in all its glory.

“Good to know I don’t mean shit to my best friend,” he muttered, only half joking, and Eddie reached out to kick Richie in the shin.

“I wasn’t finished, Trashmouth,” Eddie snapped, holding up a finger. He looked utterly furious, but was also wearing pyjama pants covered in reindeer and his teeth were chattering violently which kind of ruined it. Richie would have laughed at him under any other circumstances.

Eddie ran his hands over his face with a sigh, his shoulders hunching over. When he looked back up, his eyes were shining.

“I couldn’t tell you because it hurt too much. I hate this house and I hate this fucking town, but leaving you behind makes me feel like I’m losing a piece of myself.”

Richie understood completely, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. It made it worse somehow, that it was how Eddie was feeling too. Richie could cope with moping alone forever if he knew Eddie could run straight out of Derry and never look back. He wanted to tell

Eddie that, but the air around them was too heavy, and Richie wanted to see Eddie smile so that Richie could know they were ok.

“Which piece of yourself?” he asked instead, smirking.

“Shut up.” Eddie started to smile a little too.

The weight on Richie's chest eased up slightly. “Are we talking a leg or an arm? Your head? Maybe your di-”

“Beep beep, fucker,” Eddie interrupted, giving Richie a shove, but he laughed as he did.

They stood in silence for a while, which made Richie twitch. There was too much going on in his head and he couldn't make sense of any of it. He couldn't push it down like he usually did, so it was flooding through all at once, making him dizzy.

Eddie reached out to squeeze Richie's arm, and Richie exhaled a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

“Will you come up? It's freezing out here,” Eddie never usually asked. He always left his window open for Richie, and it was always something unspoken between them. Richie didn't like the way it sounded out loud, but he nodded anyway.

Eddie turned to climb the wall first, but Richie stopped him.

“I'm going first, it'll take you and your midget legs forever to climb up,” he said, grinning when Eddie swore and kicked Richie's ankle.

“I'm not *that* small, you're just a freak of nature,” Eddie muttered, but moved out of the way to let Richie go first anyway.

The minute Richie got into the warmth of Eddie's room all of the tiredness from the past few sleepless nights crashed down on him like a ton of bricks, and he immediately collapsed onto Eddie's bed with a sigh.

He could hear Eddie swearing and muttering to himself as he struggled to climb up the wall, and when his head appeared over the window sill he glared at Richie.

“Take your shoes off before you get on my bed, dickhead,” he hissed. Richie just wiggled his toes and shut his eyes.

“If you want ‘em off, you take ‘em off,” he muttered back.

Eddie swore again, and Richie was sure if he opened his eyes Eddie would be giving him his best death glare. Even still once he made his way into the room he yanked Richie’s shoes off, throwing them down by the window.

Richie listened as Eddie wandered around the room, shuffling things around and jamming the Wolverine figure Richie had bought him under the door so his mother couldn’t open it, like he always did when his friends were around without her permission.

The bed dipped when Eddie crawled on next to Richie, and Richie could hear the rasping in Eddie’s breath as he settled himself down, wiggling around to pull the covers over himself.

Richie cracked open one eye to see Eddie was already watching him, settled on his side and propping his head up with his hand. Richie stared back, his mind flickering through all of the nights they’d spent together curled up on the same bed, watching movies or reading the same comic with Eddie telling Richie off for turning the page too soon. Eddie was always warm, always familiar, always fit into Richie’s side like pieces of a puzzle.

Richie shut his eyes again so he didn’t do anything stupid like tell his best friend he loved him. He was still a little drunk, and wasn’t the best at keeping his mouth shut even when he was sober.

“I haven’t told my mom about New York yet,” Eddie said, voice small.

“She’s going to blow a fuse,” Richie said with a snort, a little bit delighted at the idea.

Eddie groaned, and Richie opened an eye again to look at him.

“Don’t let her change your mind,” Richie said sternly. Eddie had learnt to step out of his mother’s shadow, but she still knew exactly how to press his buttons to convince him he was wrong, that he

needed her. Eddie shook his head and gave Richie a small smile, eyes shining with determination.

“What about you?” Eddie asked, and Richie frowned.

“What’s your mom going to change my mind about?” he asked, his tired mind trying to make sense of it whilst Eddie rolled his eyes.

“No, dumbass. I mean *are* you going to try and change my mind about leaving?” he said, suddenly looking nervous.

Richie sighed, shutting his eyes again.

“Of course not,” he answered softly.

Eddie wouldn’t listen regardless. If he was ready to battle his own mother about leaving, there’s no way Richie could convince him to stay, and he wouldn’t want to. Eddie deserved to get as far away from Derry and his overbearing mother as soon as possible. Richie being left behind was just collateral damage.

They stayed quiet for a while, and Richie listened to Eddie’s breathing and the scratching sound as he wiggled his feet together under the covers. He always did that before he fell asleep - Richie had told him he looked like a dreaming dog once, and Eddie had shoved his cold feet into the back of Richie’s knees in retaliation, making him squawk.

“I didn’t want to tell you because it would make it real,” Eddie said eventually, voice wobbling.

Richie could sympathise. There were a lot of things he didn’t want to say out loud because they’d go from just an idea to something solid that other people could get their hands on.

Richie turned so he was facing Eddie, but didn’t open his eyes. He flinched when he felt Eddie’s fingers brush his nose, and Eddie muttered an apology before pulling Richie’s glasses off his head and folding them up with a click.

Richie could feel sleep pulling him under, and he was grateful to finally, *finally* be able to sleep, but at the same time he and Eddie had

a lot to talk about, and not a lot of time left.

He was so tired, and not just in the regular way. He was sick of having a storm raging inside of himself, sick of anticipating all the grief that was coming his way when he'd have to say goodbye to the best friends he'd ever have, one by one.

"You're gonna forget about me," Richie mumbled, his words slurring. He half hoped Eddie didn't understand him, but of course he had.

Eddie made a noise like he'd been punched.

"I could *never*," he replied fiercely, and it made Richie smile to himself.

"Promise?" Richie asked, holding a hand out that Eddie grabbed onto and held on tight.

"I promise," Eddie's voice was quiet but fierce.

Eddie said something more, but his voice sounded far away as Richie gave in and fell asleep, still holding on to Eddie's hand.

Notes for the Chapter:

Fic title is from [this song](#), chapter title from [this one](#)

you can find me on [tumblr](#) if you'd like

2. lean for me, and I'll fall back

Notes for the Chapter:

warnings for discussions of period-typical homophobia, mentions of blood, and Richie truly butchering Shakespeare

The worst thing about sleeping at Eddie's house was having to sneak out at the ass crack of dawn to avoid his mother finding out.

Richie was not a morning person. He was even less of a morning person when he woke up to a neurotic Eddie Kaspbrak dumping his jacket on his head before practically shoving him out of the window.

"You need to get out *right now*," Eddie was whisper-shouting, throwing Richie's glasses at him. "She's in the shower but she'll be knocking on my door any minute."

"Jus' tell her you're jackin' off. She won't come in then," Richie mumbled tiredly with a lazy grin. Eddie threw one of Richie's shoes at his head with a grunt.

As if she was summoned there was a knock on Eddie's door, and Eddie froze in panic. Richie practically leapt out of the window, managing to stop and blow a kiss to Eddie before he started to climb down, his feet skidding against the brick of the wall. He was glad he didn't miss Eddie's eye roll and the following grin just before he lost sight of him.

Richie walked down the street barefoot with only one shoe in his hand and his jacket just slung over his shoulder despite the cold. He thought he'd feel better for sleeping, but it hadn't gotten rid of that tired heavy feeling at all. Eddie was leaving and Richie felt lost. He was helpless and he was stuck, because he didn't want to stop Eddie from going, but couldn't imagine not having him around either.

Richie went straight to the clubhouse - his parents were away for the weekend and he hated being home alone - and to his surprise Stan and Bill were already there.

“What the hell happened to you?” Stan asked, taking in a barefoot and still half asleep Richie as he climbed down the stairs. Bill was sitting in the armchair scribbling in his notebook and Stan was sat at the makeshift table Mike had put in, which was actually just a few milk crates taped together and covered with a sheet.

“Mrs K happened. Had to sneak out of Eddie’s,” Richie mumbled, collapsing into the hammock and shutting his eyes.

There were a few beats of heavy silence, and when Richie opened his eyes both Bill and Stan were staring at him.

“What?”

“S-s-so you guys m-made up?” Bill asked, and Richie rolled his eyes.

“We were never fighting,” he replied.

“You were mad at him,” Stan said. It wasn’t a question.

Richie shrugged. He was never really mad at Eddie, just sad, mostly. Stan mirrored Richie’s shrug and went back to whatever he was doing at the table, which when Richie looked closer, turned out to be sifting through polaroids. Richie couldn’t make out what they were polaroids of, but he assumed it would be something boring like different types of plants or birds.

“S-sh-should we throw him a luh-leaving p-party?” Bill piped up just as Richie was about to doze off again.

Richie’s heart stuttered in his chest. Eddie was the one leaving first, and Richie wished he wasn’t.

Bill and Stan started talking about planning some kind of day out for Eddie before he left, and Richie kept his eyes shut and ignored them, willing himself to fall back to sleep. He was going to be fine with Eddie leaving because Eddie would already have plenty of things to stress about without worrying about Richie too. That didn’t mean he wasn’t allowed to be miserable about it when Eddie wasn’t around.

Richie knew he was dreaming because of the way time kept cutting around him, flashing backwards and forwards despite the fact he

wasn't moving. It didn't feel like one of the nightmares he often had where dark tendrils curled around his vision and fear took over his whole body, but he felt uneasy as he stood in the middle of the street and looked around. He spotted a group of people ahead of him that he started to follow before he even realised he wanted to.

Bill turned around first, followed by the rest of his friends, all shimmering around the edges, all translucent enough that Richie could see the shadows of other people moving through their bodies.

All of his friends were looking at him with the same confused expression, but it was Eddie who spoke.

"Do I know you?" he asked, and it was then Richie realised his friends were fading away as peals of cackling laughter he knew all too well echoed around him.

Richie woke up with a gasp and looked wildly around the clubhouse, swearing under his breath. It was just Stan left, curled up on the chair Bill had been in before and reading a book that was thicker than his head. He stared at Richie with a frown, moving to get up from his seat but stopping when Richie waved him off and gave him a thumbs up, trying to calm down his breathing.

As far as dreams went, that wasn't even close to the worst ones he'd had. He called a night's sleep a success if he didn't wake up mid way through a panic attack and have to run to the bathroom to spew into the sink. But something about it felt ominous, like there was some truth to it. Richie tried to shake it off. He was so sick of that clown still fucking with him years after they'd sent it back to wherever it came from.

"You're still here?" Richie asked Stan with a yawn, stretching himself out and taking his glasses off to rub his eyes. For a second it had looked like Stan was shimmering like he had been in the dream, and Richie had to look away before he started to panic again. He had no idea what time it was, but the light coming in from the clubhouse was much dimmer than before, glowing orange and casting shadows across the room.

"Well I couldn't leave you alone here. You sleep like the dead, and

knowing your luck you'd have gotten mugged or something," Stan replied, slipping one of his polaroids in his book to mark his place before putting it down to look at Richie.

"Thanks for watching over me, brave soldier," Richie simpered, voice high as he clutched his chest. Stan just snorted and shook his head, which was usually as close as Richie ever got to a laugh from Stan.

Richie was still shaking a little bit from his dream, which was weird. It was just a build up of everything he'd been feeling about his friends leaving finally getting into his subconscious - a dream that actually made sense for once - but for some reason Richie couldn't brush it away easily.

"Eddie leaving has really gotten to you, hasn't it?" Stan asked, voice soft.

Richie blew a raspberry and waved his hand with a frown. "Nah, I'll be glad to see the back of the grumpy little-" he began, but Stan interrupted, levelling him with a look.

"Rich, be serious," he said, and Richie crumpled a little. Stan would let Richie get away with his bullshit until he decided Richie wasn't doing himself or anyone else any favours. Richie both equally loved him and hated him for it.

"Of course it has. He's my best friend." Richie mumbled, ducking his head.

"Thanks," Stan replied dryly, but Richie could see the hint of a smile.

"You know what I mean," Richie smiled back. "You're all my best friends, and you're all leaving little ol' me behind," Richie had meant for it to sound like a joke, but by the look on Stan's face he hadn't quite managed it.

"We're not leaving *you* Richie, we're growing up, we're moving the hell out of this town. It's normal," Stan said with a frown, shoulders up around his ears. Richie might have been imagining it, but it sounded like Stan was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince Richie.

Richie just shrugged. It just would be an endless loop of him knowing he was being unreasonable but not being able to stop it. There was nothing else he could say.

Stan spoke again whilst Richie busied himself cleaning his glasses. "You need to learn how to talk to people Richie, and not just with dumb jokes. Talk to us about how you're feeling. We're not mind readers."

Richie looked up and raised an eyebrow. "That's rich coming from you. You never tell us shit."

Stan smirked and tapped at his nose. "The less you know, the better," he said, making Richie laugh loudly.

Stan sat back and opened his book again before adding. "And just because I'm not constantly talking like you are doesn't mean I don't trust you guys. After what happened to us, there's no point in secrets."

Stan shut his eyes for a few seconds and Richie watched him shudder a little before going back to his book. Stan never mentioned that summer, but it was less because he didn't want to and more because he couldn't. Of them all, Richie felt like Stan had been affected the most, and the shadows he often saw crossing Stan's face when he thought no one was looking scared him.

Stan had been Richie's first proper friend - Bill had been more idol worship at first, and Eddie had come a little later - but Richie had gravitated to Stan, and he was lucky that Stan had let him.

Stan was the most level headed and rational out of all of the Losers. He was matter of fact and fiercely protective of his friends, and Richie loved that about him. Richie would trust Stan with his life - and had done multiple times, back when he was too young to even realise the weight of it.

If there was anyone to trust secrets with, it was Stan. Before Richie could think too hard about it he made himself speak.

"I think I'm gay," he blurted, then coughed and winced, like the

words had scarred his throat as they made their way out.

Stan looked up to Richie, face blank. "You think?" he repeated, voice calm as ever.

"I mean. I like girls too, but I like guys the same." Richie added, trying to shrug it off as nothing even though his heart was hammering.

Stan went quiet for a few moments, and Richie wanted to scream. He was desperately trying to think of a way how to backpedal and pretend it was a joke when Stan spoke again.

"You know that's ok, right?" he said, shutting his book and leaning forward in his chair so he could look at Richie properly.

Richie shrugged again. His stomach was in knots and his head throbbing as if he'd just ran for miles. He didn't know that it was okay, he couldn't, because from everything he'd heard as he grew up the general consensus was that it definitely was *not* okay.

"Well it is. Anyone who says otherwise is a braindead fuckface," Stan nodded with a face like thunder, as if he was preemptively mad at anyone who might disagree with him. Richie laughed loudly, but it quickly cracked into a sob as relief rushed through him.

"Can I ask-" Stan started, and then paused, squinting his eyes like he was trying to read Richie's mind or something.

"Spit it out, Stan. We're all friends here." Richie said, putting his glasses back on so he could see Stan again.

"Is this. Are y-" Stan made a frustrated noise, before bringing his palms together, and for a terrifying, irrational moment, Richie thought that he was *praying*.

But then Stan pointed his hands towards Richie and just said "Eddie..." before his voice drifted off again, and Richie's stomach lurched.

"How about one earth shattering confession at a time, Stanley?" Richie managed to choke out. Stan nodded quickly, but with the look

he gave Richie they both already knew exactly what the question was, and exactly what the answer would be.

There was a thud from the top stair of the clubhouse, and both Stan and Richie jumped, looking up frantically and sighing with relief when they saw Eddie making his way down with Richie's other shoe in one of his hands.

"You two look suspicious," Eddie said when he made it to the bottom and stared at Stan and Richie, both of whom were trying their best to look like they hadn't been close to tears a few seconds ago.

"You caught us," Richie said, throwing his arms up. "We were sharing stories about how good your mom is in bed," he smirked.

Stan rolled his eyes as Eddie swore loudly, pitching Richie's shoe at him and hitting him square in the stomach with it.

"I'm leaving," Stan announced over Eddie who was still cursing Richie out, and Stan flashed Richie a small smile that made warmth settle in his chest. Eddie just muttered a goodbye, immediately stealing Stan's spot, but Richie made sure to catch Stan's eye and mouth a thanks before he left.

Richie already felt a little bit lighter. He had no idea why he hadn't told Stan earlier.

"Are you going to tell me what you guys were actually talking about?" Eddie asked once Stan had gone, and Richie tapped his nose. He was all out of courage for now.

"That's none of ya business, scamp," he crowed in a grating voice. He could practically hear Eddie's eye roll as he got back up and turned on the crackling old radio Mike had found for the clubhouse.

The radio only had one station and was almost always filled with static, but they all loved it anyway. The Losers took turns bringing their proper stereos to play mixtapes when they were all there, but Mike had brought down the old radio he'd found at a dump to keep at the clubhouse. Stan had cleaned it up, Eddie had fixed up the wires, and Richie had covered it in stickers and scribbled all over it

with sharpie. Richie hummed along quietly to the song it had landed on, watching Eddie fiddle with the dials because he hated having it on an odd number, wincing at the static he kept hitting.

Richie could tell Eddie was itching to talk about New York again since Richie had fallen asleep before they could talk about it properly. He was glancing at Richie a little too often, and when he sat back down he was wringing his hands together nervously.

Richie spoke first, breaking the silence. "They want to throw you a leaving party," he said, and Eddie sagged with relief that Richie had gotten the hint before realising what he had said.

"But we're all leaving, shouldn't it be a party for all of us?" he asked, frowning.

"I'm not leaving," Richie pointed out, making Eddie's frown deepen, "and you're the one going first, so they want to throw a party."

"Do you not want to leave?" asked Eddie, and Richie's breath hitched. He desperately didn't want to talk about this, but he could hear Stan's voice in his head and see his disapproving stare. *You need to learn how to talk to people Richie.*

"Sure I do, I'm just waiting for a knight in shining armour to rescue me," Stan had said Richie had to talk to people but hadn't said anything about not using voices to get his point across. At least not specifically.

Eddie rolled his eyes. "What voice was that supposed to be?"

Richie waved his hand. "A princess, obviously."

"Why was she Scottish?" Eddie asked, head tilted to the side.

"She wasn't *Scottish* are you deaf?" Richie laughed.

"No, you're just shit at voices," Eddie retorted, before he paused and added, "Are you sad?"

Richie's heartbeat started to echo through his head, and he curled up on himself as if it would shield him away from Eddie's question.

"Of *course* the princess is sad, she's locked in a tower," Richie knew that wasn't what Eddie had meant, but it was worth a try.

"I mean are *you* sad, Richie?" Eddie insisted.

"Sad about what?" Richie managed, turning his head away from Eddie.

"I don't know. You always look so sad lately." The radio was mostly spitting out static again now, but neither of them noticed.

Richie picked up the comic beside his head just for something to do. He could feel Eddie staring at him, but he couldn't look back. His stomach was doing somersaults and his eyes were stinging.

"Richie," Eddie prompted, voice barely heard over the fizzes and pops of the radio.

Richie took a deep breath, his chest aching with it. "I don't know what you want me to say," he sighed.

"I want you to tell me what's wrong," Eddie snapped, and out of the corner of his eye Richie saw him throw his hands up and get out of the chair.

Richie didn't know how to explain it, because it wasn't exactly something tangible. It was something heavy and dark buried at the back of his mind that didn't have a name or a form, but he could feel it there anyway.

"I'm—" Richie started, and then stopped, grunting and thumping his chest with his fist as if it would force the words out.

He didn't know how to say it, how to explain that it felt like his whole world was crumbling underneath his feet and no matter where he went it wouldn't matter if he didn't have his friends by his side.

"I don't know who I am without you guys," Richie's voice was barely a whisper, and he hated how small he sounded.

"What?" Eddie choked out, but Richie knew he'd heard him just fine.

Richie sat himself up and pulled his glasses off, putting his head in his hands and digging his knuckles into his eyes so hard he saw sparks behind his eyelids.

“Shit,” Richie hissed, then. “That summer was fucked up, I know it was,” Richie didn’t need to specify which summer he was talking about, there was only one summer that had turned all of their lives upside down. “But am I crazy for almost being grateful it?”

The noise that came out of Eddie’s mouth made it very clear that yes, he thought Richie was crazy.

“You’re grateful we almost got murdered by a fucking clown?” he asked incredulously.

“Oh yeah, because it was always my dream to be eaten by a circus freak,” Richie retorted, glaring over to where Eddie was sat. “I hated it, we all did, but we got out of there and we stuck together. You guys made all of this bearable, made it worth it. Do you remember why you said you couldn’t tell me about New York?”

“Of course,” Eddie said, then wrinkled his nose up, “you made a dick joke.”

Richie’s laugh was a little wet, a little too close to a sob, so he pressed his fists into his eyes again and took a deep breath.

“But that’s how I feel too. Like you’re all pieces of me and you’re all leaving and I knew this wasn’t going to last forever, but now I don’t know what to do.”

Eddie sighed. “You do whatever you want, moron, that’s the point. We get to leave now, we get to do what we want and make futures for ourselves,” Eddie’s voice had sounded like Stan’s had when he’d said something similar. Like he was trying to convince himself, like he didn’t believe it but desperately wanted to.

Richie remembered when he was younger he’d been desperate to get out of Derry, felt like he was boxed in and had no other option but to run. He still wanted to run, but running blind hadn’t scared him then like it did now. “When I look into my future I don’t see anything,”

Richie admitted quietly, trying to shrug it off like it was nothing, but the thought scared him more than he'd ever admit.

It's why he'd worked so hard to push it away and ignore it. There was a gap in his vision, nothing but an endless white wall blocking his view that was as high as it was wide. In his future, Richie saw nothing, and most of the time that terrified him. Sometimes though, he didn't even care; he just wanted the blank space to swallow him whole. He didn't know which of those feelings was worse.

"*Richie*," Eddie choked out. It sounded like he was close to crying too. "Get up."

Richie looked up, glasses still in his lap so Eddie was just a blur, but Richie could see he'd moved closer.

"Get *up*, dumbass," Eddie insisted, voice urgent. Richie put his glasses back on and did as he was told.

The second Richie straightened up after climbing out of the hammock, Eddie tackled Richie into a hug, clinging on tight. His nails were digging into Richie's back and he must have been on his tiptoes because his face was stuffed into the crook of Richie's neck. Richie wasn't entirely sure if he was going to collapse, or cry, or maybe both.

"Hug me back, asshole," Eddie muttered into Richie's skin, and Richie didn't need to be told twice. He wrapped his arms around Eddie, holding on just as tight as Eddie was to him, and took a deep breath in.

The aching tiredness he hadn't been able to shake for days finally washed out of him as Eddie gripped onto Richie's shirt and swayed them both from side to side ever so slightly.

I think I love you, Richie wanted to say, the thought of saying it out loud almost overwhelming him to the point of feeling dizzy. *I love you more than I think I'll ever love anyone else*.

Instead, Richie just pressed a kiss into Eddie's hair, hiding it there, and held onto Eddie for as long as he'd let him.

Eddie put a little bit of distance between him and Richie so he could speak, and Richie tried his best not to look too disappointed about it. “You’re gonna grow up and be whatever the fuck you want to be, and you’re gonna be *happy*,” he said sternly, “and you’re not going to lose any of us. You’re stuck with me forever, that’s for sure.”

Forever sounded pretty amazing to Richie. He tried to imagine Eddie all grown up, same fierce look as ever but with crows feet and laughter lines to tally up all the times he’d got to be happy. Richie desperately wished he’d get to see that.

Richie hummed. “Can I swap your forever for Bev’s? I think I like her more,” he joked. Eddie gave Richie a shove backwards but he was laughing too, scrubbing his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Fuck you, shithead,” Eddie muttered, but there was no bite to it.

Richie had watched all of his friends grow up, but he felt like Eddie had grown up the most. He’d always been so pale when they were younger; dark rings under his eyes from living under his mother’s shadow, weighed down by the fears she’d buried deep inside him. Eddie would come alive and leave that shadow in flickers at first, like when they were all playing in the Barrens, or when he’d laugh so hard he ended up wheezing but never once reached for his inhaler.

When it came to the clown, Eddie was the bravest of them all. Eddie was afraid of a laundry list of things (the strangest, in Richie’s opinion, being mushrooms. “They’re *literally* fungus Richie, that’s mould. No one should eat that shit,” he’d yelled when Richie had made fun of him for it), but Eddie had been full of nothing but fight when they’d faced it. Richie was sure he’d never meet anyone else as brave as Eddie Kaspbrak; he just hoped that Eddie would never lose that fireceness in his eyes, never forget how brave he could be. Richie hoped he could be around to make sure it never did, to remind Eddie of just how strong he was.

Richie realised a little bit too late that he’d been staring at Eddie without speaking for way too long, and even though they weren’t hugging anymore, they were still stood pretty closely together.

“Um,” Eddie started, eyes scanning Richie’s face. “I should go. My

mom doesn't know I left the house."

It could have been the leftover bravery from talking to Stan, or because Eddie was moving away and it was now or never, or just because Eddie was staring at him in a way that made Richie feel like his heart was going to pop straight out of his chest. But something made Richie reach out and grab hold of Eddie's arm to stop him turning away.

Eddie looked at him, confused, and Richie took a deep breath. "Please don't be mad," he mumbled, before leaning forward and kissing Eddie gently.

He took a stumbling step back the second he did it, partly because of the repeated chant of *what the fuck* that was careening around his head, and partly because of the choked noise Eddie had made. Eddie slapped a hand across his own mouth, staring at Richie, and Richie would have made fun of him any other time if his brain hadn't completely short circuited.

"Listen, Eds, I'm sor-" Richie began, holding his hands up placatingly, but Eddie cut him off.

"Holy *shit*," Eddie gasped out. He dropped his hands, took a step back, and then two forward, closing the distance between him and Richie. "Do that again."

"*What?*" Richie kind of hoped he was having another one of his weird dreams, but Eddie looked pretty real. He was looking at Richie with an expression he couldn't decipher, even though he was pretty much the expert on the full range of Eddie faces.

"Kiss me again," Eddie replied, nodding to himself as he spoke. His mouth quirked up into a tiny smile and Richie was almost certain he was going to have a heart attack.

"*Really?*" Richie's voice was at least three octaves higher than usual. He was having some kind of out of body experience where he didn't feel like he was in control of himself. His real self was probably floating above his head calling him a fucking idiot.

Eddie threw his hands up, exasperated. Richie definitely recognised that face.

“Jesus christ Richie if you don’t kiss me in the next three seconds I swear to god I’ll-” he started, but Richie didn’t let him finish. He closed the gap between him and Eddie, put his hands either side of Eddie’s face, and kissed him again. This time Eddie reached up and met Richie half way, throwing his arms around Richie’s neck and kissing him back.

Everything else in Richie’s head went quiet other than a chorus of Eddie’s name again and again, and when they broke apart Eddie was grinning widely, his eyes shining as he tangled his fingers into the hair at the nape of Richie’s neck.

“Holy shit,” Eddie said again, and Richie bumped their noses together, making Eddie grin even more.

“Holy shit,” he agreed. He still felt like he was dangerously close to a heart attack but Eddie was smiling at him as he used his free hand to gently straighten up his glasses, so Richie figured it was a good kind of heart attack, if there even was something like that.

It was an overwhelming feeling that took over his whole body, and Richie wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted to squirm away from it or lean further in.

“Well *I say*,” Richie began, but Eddie glared and cut him off immediately.

“Do *not* do the British Guy right now. Do not ruin this, asshole,” Eddie demanded, pulling at Richie’s hair a little bit. He was making the twisted up face that told Richie he was trying hard not to laugh, so Richie wrapped his arms around Eddie’s waist and leant forward to press a kiss to his temple.

His British accent wasn’t the best, but it always made Eddie laugh. “Why, I don’t know *what* you mean, good sir,” Richie cooed, kissing Eddie’s face again, this time his cheek.

“I’m leaving,” Eddie said, voice flat, but he made no move to step out

of Richie's arms. Richie's grin was so big that it made his face ache.

A familiar voice shouted out Richie's name above ground, and Eddie immediately jumped back like he'd been scalded. Richie tried his best not to feel too hurt, especially when Eddie realised what he'd done and gave Richie an apologetic look.

Bev's head appeared over the trapdoor, grinning. "Thought I'd find you guys here!" she called down, and Richie knew it was irrational to be mad at her for breaking up whatever the fuck he and Eddie had just ventured into, but he couldn't help it. Richie's friends seemed to have a sixth sense for meaningful conversations and an innate need to interrupt them, like no one was allowed to talk about feelings anymore without all of the Losers present.

"Damn, we thought we were doing such a good job of hiding from you," Richie sighed at the same time Eddie waved, looking slightly less shell-shocked than he had been before.

Bev stared at Richie and Eddie from where she was still leaning over the entrance, head cocked to one side.

"Did I interrupt something?" she asked, eyes moving back and forth between the two boys.

"Nope," Eddie said at the same time Richie said "Yes," making Eddie turn to glare at him.

"Eddie was making me check out a *really* weird mole on his ass. It's super freaky. You're lucky you didn't see, Bev," Richie said solemnly. Eddie punched him hard in the shoulder and Bev giggled into her hand.

"I hate you," Eddie said to Richie, and then, "I'm leaving before my mom realises I'm gone and calls the police."

Bev rattled a box of cigarettes at Richie with a grin before disappearing out of view, and Richie smiled and lead the way up the steps, holding his hand out to help Eddie up and giving it a squeeze before letting go.

Bev was already sat on a tree stump and lighting a cigarette for

herself “See you tomorrow?” she asked Eddie. “Apparently Stan wants to call a meeting.

“Of course he does,” Richie said fondly with a roll of his eyes, sitting down beside Bev and taking a cigarette from the box she handed him.

“Stan will kill us all we don’t show up to one of his meetings,” Eddie sighed. His voice was nothing but fond too.

Eddie was rocking on his heels a little, and his eyes kept flitting back to Richie like he wanted to say something more. Richie felt a sudden shock of panic that things had changed between him and Eddie now, and not in a good way. They hadn’t gotten a chance to talk so Richie had no idea where he stood, and he was pretty sure he’d fling himself off of the nearest cliff if he’d ruined his and Eddie’s friendship by not being able to keep his stupid heart in check.

But Eddie smiled when Richie caught his eye, and Richie grinned back which made Eddie smile even wider before he gave them one last wave and trudged off through the weeds. Richie had done something stupid, but the world hadn’t imploded and Eddie hadn’t punched him or ran away - he’d kissed him back. Richie wasn’t entirely sure what to do with that information, so he tucked it away at the back of his mind for now, trying his best to not do something embarrassing like cry or burst into song like he was in a crappy romance film.

“I have a proposition for you,” Bev said after a while, and Richie grinned, tipping an invisible hat.

“And what might ye be propositioning’ to this cowboy, m’lady?” Richie said in a gruff voice.

“Worst cowboy impression ever,” Bev replied, but she was smiling. “You know I’m not going to college, right?”

Richie nodded. Bev didn’t want to go to college, she just wanted to get the fuck out of Derry as soon as possible.

“Well, I’ve decided I’m going to Detroit,” Bev said.

“What’s in Detroit?” Richie asked with a frown. Bev shrugged, but

her expression was wistful, like she was imagining it.

“I don’t know, but I want to find out,” Bev said, and then bumped hers and Richie’s shoulders together. “And I want you to come with me.”

Richie choked on his inhale, folding over on himself whilst Bev laughed.

“Why?” Richie asked. He’d just assumed his friends were all going their separate ways with their different goals and visions of the future. Since Richie didn’t have any of that, he thought it was best he stayed put where he knew best. Not where was safe - Derry could never be described as safe - but for all of its faults, it was home.

“Why not?” Bev shot back cheerfully. “I want to go to Detroit and I want my favourite guy to come with me. Plus, you can help me with the rent.”

Richie leant over to kiss Bev’s cheek but stayed quiet. Bev wasn’t worried about not going to college, she just wanted to find her way on her own without anyone telling her what to do. Bev had spent a long time with her shitty father shrinking her down until she was nothing, controlling her every move, and so she’d always made sure to censor herself, make herself pliable. Now her father was dead - good riddance to the fucker, Richie always thought bitterly when Bev’s father crossed his mind - Bev was learning how to be herself. She liked unpredictability and adventure now, wanted to be impulsive and brave and take joy as it came, and that was why she and Richie got on so well. Richie could imagine them both living together easily; it would be a world of chaos, but it would be completely their own.

“You’ve got a deal, pardner,” Richie slurred out eventually, and Bev’s whole face lit up as she sprung up from her seat and grabbed hold of Richie’s face, covering him with kisses.

Richie maybe should have thought about it more but he didn’t want to. The idea of him staying with Bev settled into his brain and felt right there, as right as it had felt when he’d kissed Eddie.

It turned out Richie was having a *really* good day.

*

Richie's parents had taken Richie's decision to go with Bev surprisingly well. Even though he'd tried to hide it, Richie knew his dad had been disappointed when Richie had told them he didn't want to go to college. Even still, both his parents had hugged him and told Richie they trusted him to do what was best, and if Richie had cried a little bit when they did, no one had to know.

He knew how lucky he was to have parents like his - even if they worked late most nights and made him suffer through weekly family game night where there'd always be at least one argument - they always made sure to let him know he was loved. He'd seen what Eddie's and Bev's parents had done to them, and there'd been plenty of times growing up where Richie had insisted his parents should adopt his friends too. They'd always laughed at him but Richie had been deadly serious; him and his parents had more than enough love to share around.

Richie told them about Detroit straight after he left Bev, and they sat and listened patiently whilst he told them all about Bev's offer and their plans to drive the fifteen hour trip in Richie's old rust bucket of a car, stopping off at a few places on the way. They listened to him even when he drifted off on tangents or stopped to repeat a joke, and that was what Richie loved most about them. They always listened.

When he finished, Richie mumbled a weak "ta-dah," and waited for them to speak.

"Is this what you want?" his mother asked, staring at him with her chin resting on her hand.

Richie shrugged. "I don't know, but I want to find out," he answered honestly.

Both his parents nodded as if in sync, before his father said "Ok,

then,” and Richie raised an eyebrow.

“That’s it? Your favourite child is flying the nest and you just say *ok then?* ”

“You’re our only child,” his father pointed out. “And still not our favourite.” his father grinned wickedly and Richie snorted, holding his hand out for a high five.

“We just want you to be happy. It’s you who needs to figure out what that means,” said his mother quietly, and Richie’s stomach did a flip.

When Richie had tried to think of the future he only thought of the things he’d be able to list, like how he’d thought of his friends and them going to college being one of the ticks checked off on their lists. College, then a job, families and kids. He’d never really thought about if any of those things would make him happy or not, and his mother’s words made his head hurt.

He didn’t know what would make him happy, but he wanted to find out, and that was enough.

Richie nodded a little dumbly before pulling both of his parents into a hug. They all cried a little bit this time, and none of them minded at all.

Richie left for Eddie’s house when his parents had gone to bed, and he laughed out loud at himself when he stopped at the end of Eddie’s street, suddenly feeling frozen up with nerves. He lit the cigarette he’d taken from Bev’s pack and kept behind his ear, breathing in and watching the smoke fan around him for a while, trying to calm himself down.

He had spent an embarrassingly long time coming up with all different scenarios that could happen if he ever did something about liking Eddie more than a friend, and a lot of them had ended badly. It had been his secret that he’d held close for so long and let fester, growing into something even he didn’t recognize. But now it was out in the open - at least to him and the person who mattered most - and it was okay, *he* was ok, it would just take him a while to get used to that.

Eddie and Richie had been through much worse than this, it would take way more than them making out in the clubhouse to break them. Eddie had kissed Richie back, and smiled that bright smile saved for when Eddie was at his happiest. They could only go up from here.

Or at least that's what Richie told himself as stubbed out his cigarette and set off walking again.

Richie popped his head into the window of Eddie's bedroom to see him sitting on the bed cross legged and staring at the ceiling.

"But soft!" Richie called through the window, making Eddie jump and almost fall off the bed. "What light through yonder window breaks?" He was holding his nose to change his voice, and had his free hand slung over the windowsill to stop himself from falling.

Eddie rolled his eyes but was grinning. "Are you seriously butchering Shakespeare right now?"

Richie carried on, undeterred. "It is the...West?"

"East," Eddie corrected, still grinning.

"And Juliet is the sun," Richie was still only halfway through the window, and Eddie walked over to grab hold of the front of Richie's shirt so that he could drag him in.

"Be quiet, you'll wake my mom," Eddie hissed, stumbling backwards as Richie made his way in.

"But she's my Juliet," Richie said, clutching his chest. "I came to see her."

"You're so annoying," Eddie muttered as he leaned forward to kiss Richie, fist still in his shirt.

Richie didn't know what the panic he'd felt outside had been about because kissing Eddie felt almost overwhelmingly right. It was still Eddie, who went along with all of Richie's crazy ideas, who was always arguing with Richie but always laughed at his stupidest of jokes too. Eddie was still his best friend. They hadn't changed, they'd

just grown up, like Stan had said.

Eddie took a step back first, and stopped Richie when he chased Eddie's lips, trying to kiss him again.

"You taste like an ashtray," Eddie said with a grimace.

"Well, if I'd have known you were going to jump on me the second I made it through the window, I would have brought some mouthwash," Richie retorted, beaming when Eddie's face turned red.

Eddie let go of Richie's shirt and took another step back, and Richie mourned the loss of his body heat.

"Is this ok?" Eddie asked, voice suddenly quiet and unsure. "I mean. Are we alright?"

And there was the anxiety that had come to Richie too. Richie should have known Eddie would be tying himself in knots over it but trying to pretend he wasn't. If Richie had been worried, Eddie would be twice as worried, with extra panic on top.

"No complaints here," Richie put his hand up and winked, making Eddie laugh under his breath. "We're always ok, Eds," he added softly.

"Don't call me that," Eddie said absently, running his hand through his hair. He still looked anxious, but when Richie stepped closer Eddie leant into it so that his shoulder was against Richie's chest.

Richie curled his arm around Eddie's waist and squeezed. "I'm going to sneak into the bathroom to use your mouthwash so you'll stop complaining, and then we can talk, alright?"

Eddie nodded before pressing a quick kiss to the underside of Richie's jaw - Richie hated how breathless something so small made him - and shoving him towards the door.

"Do *not* wake my mom up. She'll kill us both," Eddie threatened, pointing his finger at Richie.

"I promise I'll be gentle when I give her a goodnight kiss," Richie

whispered, laughing at Eddie cursing him out as he disappeared out of the room.

Eddie was sitting on his bed again when Richie came back, waiting for him. Richie crawled on next to him and leant in heavily to Eddie's side.

"This is weird, right?" Eddie asked, but even as he did, he held his hand out so that Richie could tangle their fingers together.

Richie thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

"It's weird how *not* weird it is," he said, and Eddie scoffed.

Richie thought of the years he'd spent sneaking extra glances at Eddie when he wasn't looking, how every song he heard reminded him of Eddie in some way, and how he'd light up whenever he got Eddie to laugh. He'd so often he wished he could just hold Eddie's hand like he was doing right now as if it was the easiest thing in the world. Richie wouldn't call it weird at all. Maybe something a little closer to a fucking miracle.

Richie hadn't known Eddie had felt the same. He was pretty sure whatever Eddie was feeling wasn't nearly as intense as what Richie was - Richie would have known, he was sure - but it enough that he'd kissed Richie back. It had seemed so easy that Richie was still waiting for the catch.

"Is it weird to you?" Richie asked.

Eddie wrapped an arm around Richie's middle and hummed, thinking about it.

"Yeah, a little," he replied. Eddie was always brutally honest, sometimes to a fault. Richie was the one who spoke before he thought about it, but Eddie was the one who would answer anything with complete honesty, even if it might hurt someone's feelings. "I mean, friends don't do this, right? Especially if it's two guys," Eddie spoke fast, like he'd been thinking about it, running the words around his head for a long time before he got to speak them out loud.

Richie was glad they were sitting in a way that they couldn't look at each other. He kept his eyes fixed on the wall - on a picture Eddie had tacked up of him, Bill, and Stan - and nodded.

"You know it's okay though, right?" Richie said quietly. He wasn't entirely sure if he was trying to convince himself or convince Eddie. "I know what all of those asshole bullies said when we were kids, but this is ok."

He weirdly wished Stan were there. He'd made it sound much more convincing than Richie could.

Eddie squirmed, and he untangled his and Richie's fingers so he could draw patterns into Richie's open palm instead as he spoke.

"It wasn't just them though was it? Everyone thinks it, even people you think are nice. No one thinks that-" Eddie paused, moving his hands away from Richie and onto his own lap. "No one thinks stuff like this is ok."

Richie knew exactly what Eddie meant because he'd heard it too. People like Bowers were just plain evil, and would snarl any insult he could think of to get to people before he got a chance to use his fists. It didn't matter if what he said was true or even if he believed it, as long as it hurt.

But then there were regular people who were kind and good, but would make offhand comments about *those queers* and how dirty and they were. Richie had heard his parents say those types of things over dinner or as they walked down the street. He'd watched his teachers join in jokes other kids had made about a classmate they thought was gay.

Richie couldn't think of what to say. Eddie was right, and maybe things would get better one day, maybe people would start to be kinder, but it wasn't like that right now. Richie had heard of men losing their jobs and everyone they loved or even being killed just because they'd been seen holding another man's hand.

"My mom would get me locked up if she found out, you know?" Eddie's voice was quiet but Richie winced anyway, shutting his eyes

tight. "I've heard her say before that all th-the homos should be locked away because they were sick, and the streets would be safer without them."

Eddie took in a deep, wobbly breath that rattled in his chest, and Richie wanted to cry. Richie wondered if either of them would ever be okay with saying it out loud, somewhere where anyone else could hear. Richie had felt like his whole world was ready to cave in when he'd just told Stan, so he couldn't imagine doing anything other than hiding it away.

It wasn't like that because of Eddie though. Richie wasn't ashamed of anything to do with Eddie, he could never be. He just knew other people wouldn't see it how he did.

"They just don't get it," Richie managed, clearing his throat when his voice cracked embarrassingly. "It doesn't feel wrong to me or sick to me. How much I like you, I mean."

Eddie huffed a laugh and looked to Richie with a smile, reaching out and taking his hand again.

Richie grinned. "I mean, someone as hot as you, who *wouldn't* find you -" he started, but Eddie stopped him with a thump to his chest.

"You're a moron," Eddie muttered, then his face softened. "I get it though. I mean, when I was younger I kept telling myself you didn't count." Eddie looked away, shuffling uncomfortably as if he'd just admitted something terrible, and Richie frowned.

"I didn't count?" he repeated, and Eddie nodded.

"My mom told me boys shouldn't like other boys like *that*. She used to tell me off whenever I'd hug Bill goodbye, saying it was dirty. I believed her for a long time, but I kept telling myself that you didn't count somehow, because you'd hug me all the time."

"I hug everyone, I'm like a lovable octopus. Don't think you're special," Richie interjected with a grin.

"Shut up," Eddie grumbled. "You're so fucking loud and annoying and gross but you just feel *right* to me. Somehow. I don't fucking

know. I just thought my mom had to be wrong about what she said because of you and how great I thought you were.”

“Okay, we’re gonna have to unpack the fact that you think I’m gross-” Richie started, but Eddie cut him off.

“How many weeks have you been wearing those pants for?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Ok, touché,” Richie conceded.

“And you only brush your teeth once a day,” Eddie carried on, pulling a face. “And I’ve watched you eat food off the *floor* before. Multiple times.”

“Alright, *alright*. I get it, I’m gross,” Richie sighed, but both him and Eddie were laughing quietly, leaning into each other.

Richie knew exactly what Eddie had meant though, because Eddie made sense to Richie in a way that he could never explain. Like finally getting to sit down after a day of being on his feet, or finding something he thought he’d lost. Eddie felt like home, and made Richie feel warm and safe. There was an Eddie-shaped space in Richie’s chest, and he was pretty sure it’d be there forever. Richie hugged Eddie closer and kissed the top of his head, and he hoped Eddie knew how much he meant to him, hoped he’d never forget it.

“Wait,” Richie said, a sly smile showing up on his face. He ran over their conversation and smiled wider, prodding his finger into Eddie’s ribs. “How long, exactly, have you been pining for me?”

Eddie made an affronted sound, twisting himself around to glare at Richie.

“I wasn’t *pinning*, I-” he started, but Richie interrupted.

“Alright, yearning?” Richie suggested, sniggering at how red Eddie’s face had gone.

“No! Jesus christ do not make me regret this,” Eddie groaned, but he was laughing hard, and Richie was laughing with him.

“Too late now!” he crowed, making Eddie shush him, shoving him backwards so Richie fell onto his back.

Eddie immediately shuffled close and tucked his head under Richie’s chin, hooked a leg around Richie’s calf and slung an arm around his waist, wriggling his hand under Richie’s shirt. Richie felt like his ribs were shaking from how hard his heart was beating.

They’d definitely slept like this before, after years of sharing a bed or a couch or a hammock to sleep in, they’d learnt how fit together just right. Richie always slept best when he was in the same bed as Eddie. But this felt different, because there was no insecurities, no unanswered questions; they just wanted to be close, and were letting themselves want. Richie curled into Eddie some more, smiling to himself when he heard Eddie hum a noise of appreciation.

When Eddie spoke again his voice was quiet. “I knew I liked you more than anyone else when we were fourteen, but that pissed me off because you were basically my worst nightmare. You were smoking already, and made horrible jokes about my mom, and you were *always* covered in dirt, but I still liked you best.”

Richie remembered Eddie when they were younger, giving lectures on the different diseases they could catch and griping about what his mother would think or glaring at Richie when he made a stupid joke just to get a rise out of him. But he remembered Eddie’s laugh too, and Richie knowing he wanted to make him laugh as much as he could because Eddie’s laugh was the best sound in the world.

“You were an annoying little turd who was always complaining about me, and you kept reminding me of all of the ways I could die horribly. But I liked you best, too,” Richie said, and Eddie gave Richie a squeeze, tilting his head up to kiss Richie’s neck.

Richie thought back to the conversation with his parents, and quickly realised that Eddie made him happier than anything else he could think of. Richie was hit again with the fact that he and Eddie were leaving each other, and it set off a storm in his head that made him squirm uncomfortably.

“I’m moving to Detroit,” he blurted, and Eddie shuffled himself

backwards to squint up at Richie, making him squirm even more. Richie didn't know what he wanted Eddie to say - to beg him not to leave, to go with him to New York instead? - nothing Richie was feeling made a lot of sense, and he hated it.

"With Bev. I'm moving to Detroit with Bev because she asked me and I said yes," Richie added after a few beats of silence

Eddie stared at Richie for a while longer, but his hand was still on Richie's hip and he began drawing circles there. Richie started to count the circles, trying to convince himself to relax again.

"Is that what you want?" Eddie asked, and Richie groaned. He'd already had this question from his parents, and still didn't know the answer.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. Richie couldn't stay in Derry, he knew that now, and he loved Bev so it made sense, but other than those two thoughts he felt like he was free falling.

Eddie just hummed and leaned into Richie again, hiding his face in Richie's neck.

"What do you think?" Richie asked after a few minutes of silence. He couldn't see Eddie's face so couldn't even guess how he felt, and it made him anxious.

"I think," Eddie mumbled against the skin of Richie's neck, and then he paused for so long Richie thought he'd fallen asleep. "I think I'll miss you," he finished eventually.

For the second time that day Richie wanted to cry, and he hated it. Richie *never* cried, but after everything that had happened these past few days do his brain seemed to have forgotten that part of him and wanted to cry at everything.

"You're the one who decided you were leaving first," Richie retorted. Eddie just hummed again and Richie sighed.

"I hate this," Richie said. It wasn't just that they were all moving away, it was this feeling he couldn't shake, a dark cloud over his head that told him this was *wrong* but he couldn't work out why.

“Can we just not grow up?”

Eddie snorted, tilting his head back to smirk at Richie. “I can safely say you’ll never grow up Richie.”

“Ooh. Good one,” Richie mumbled into Eddie’s hair, and he felt Eddie grin against his neck.

Richie listened as Eddie’s breathing evened out and his body went limp, still tucked up against Richie’s side. Richie thought of a different ending to this where he left with Eddie instead - maybe with a few of the others too - but Eddie had never offered, and Richie had never asked. Eddie would go to college and ace all of his classes and become an amazing doctor, and he’d finally be far away from Derry, away from his mother. Richie wasn’t part of that equation.

Richie’s eyes were getting heavy, Eddie’s warm body making it much easier for sleep to come than it would when Richie was alone. Richie and Eddie would make their own ending, and even if they went on different paths Richie would make sure they’d see each other again. A future without Eddie in it - or even without any of the other losers - wasn’t an option for Richie.

Richie fell asleep feeling more positive than he had in a long time, smiling to himself when he heard Eddie mumbling in his sleep just before sleep took Richie over too.

The dream Richie had that night started out the same as the one he’d had in the clubhouse; his friends all transparent shapes, staring at him like he was a stranger. This time though, when Eddie spoke blood poured from his mouth, his expression changing from confusion to fear as he clutched his chest, blood seeping through his shirt now, too. Richie looked in horror to his friends to see that they were all bleeding too; blood was dripping from Stan’s arms, out of Bill’s eyes, down Bev’s neck, and Richie wanted to scream but he couldn’t. Something pulled at him, dragging him backwards so forcefully that he couldn’t fight it, and Richie called out to his friends as they all collapsed to the ground like puppets that had had their strings cut.

Richie woke up halfway through a sob, and relief washed over him

when he remembered where he was. Eddie was sprawled across Richie and drooling on his shirt, and Richie hugged him close, heart bouncing off of his ribs as tears stung his eyes and his chest heaved.

“Rich? Wh-” Eddie started to ask, but then the doorknob of Eddie’s room twisted, and Richie’s relief was immediately replaced with panic again.

Richie managed to jump off of the bed and crawl under it right as Eddie’s mother made her way into the room. He watched her feet shuffle over to the bed and he held his breath.

“Good morning, Eddie-bear,” she sang, and the bed above Richie creaked and moved as Eddie sat up.

Eddie muttered a greeting to his mother, but there was a moment of silence like she was waiting for something more, and Eddie greeted her again in the voice Richie had only heard Eddie use around his mother. Richie called it Anti-Eddie, and he hated how it sounded.

“Breakfast will be ready in fifteen minutes. Go and get a shower,” his mother instructed. “And don’t forget to use that cream I bought you.”

“Yes mommy,” Eddie replied robotically.

“That cream is the good stuff I had to pay extra for, but it’s worth it. You know how dry your skin gets,” his mother carried on, and Richie had to cover his mouth so he didn’t laugh.

“I *know*,” Eddie sounded a little more strangled this time.

“And make sure you-” his mother started again, but Eddie interrupted.

“I know how to shower, ma’,” Eddie snapped, and Richie heard the scandalised gasp of Mrs K as if Eddie had just cursed her out and spat in her face.

There were a few beats of silence, but Eddie didn’t apologise like he usually would, and Richie felt a surge of bitter pride. After Eddie had realised the hold his mother had on him, it had been an uphill battle to get the upper hand. Eddie still had a long way to go, and despite it

all, he still loved his mother, but that didn't mean he liked her very much.

His mother left without another word, slamming the door behind her, and Richie climbed back out from under the bed, smirking.

"You need to leave," Eddie demanded as he turned to face Richie. Even without his glasses Richie could see how red Eddie's face was.

"You sure you don't want me to help you apply that cream?" Richie said with a wink, and Eddie groaned.

"Get out of my house," he muttered, and Richie laughed so loudly Eddie had to hiss for him to shut up so his mother didn't hear.

Richie remembered his glasses and both of his shoes this time, and as he was making his way out of the window Eddie was heading for his bedroom door.

"See you at Stan's meeting?" asked Richie, and Eddie nodded before freezing where he stood with his hand on the doorknob. Richie watched as he took an aborted step forwards, then immediately rushed back to the window so he could kiss Richie goodbye.

It was less of a kiss and more of a clash of teeth and noses, and it made Richie's glasses fall to the floor below, bouncing off the wall on their way down, but Richie couldn't stop grinning anyway. Turns out there was no such thing as a bad kiss when it came to Eddie.

"Don't be late," Eddie said, and he was grinning too. Richie held onto that grin for the whole of his walk home.

He didn't remember about his dream until he got home to a dark house, and then it came flooding back to him like a blow to the back of his head. He didn't think it was fair that after everything he'd seen, all of the real life nightmares he'd dealt with whilst he was awake, he had to dream up new horrors when he was asleep too.

Richie could still picture Eddie's blood covered body clearly, and it began merging itself with the real things Richie had seen back at Neibolt until it became a blur of fear, just his friends and sharp claws and a whole lot of blood.

Richie's skin crawled, his legs wobbling as he hurried up to his room and switched on his radio, turning it up as high as it could go so that it shook the walls and drowned everything else out.

It was just a dream. He'd seen worse, *much* worse, and like all of the other dreams he'd had, it would pass.

Except it won't, something in the back of Richie's mind muttered. He'd had plenty of different dreams, different combinations of all of the horrors they'd seen at Neibolt, but never the same dream twice. This dream felt like something different; it was too clear, too vivid, and too hard for Richie to brush away. There was something about the way his friends looked at him like he was a stranger, and the way the blood ran around them - thick and far too real - that made dread run coldly through Richie's body.

So much for feeling good about things, Richie thought bitterly to himself.

He sat with his head as close to his radio as possible until his ears were ringing so loudly he could barely breathe, let alone think, and he stayed there until his thoughts were just a stream of white noise.

Notes for the Chapter:

chapter title from [this song](#)

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3. can I bleed within your love?

Notes for the Chapter:

obligatory warnings in this chapter for descriptions of a panic attack, and a couple of mentions of drug abuse, just in case

Richie thought he was the first one to get to the clubhouse that afternoon for Stan's meeting until someone behind him coughed loudly. Richie spun around with a yelp that was maybe a little too close to a scream for him to pretend he wasn't scared.

Stan was standing in the shadows by one of the pillars of wood, looking so smug at Richie's reaction that Richie was pretty sure he'd hid on purpose just to scare the shit out of him. He was wearing one of his stupid shower caps, specifically the one Richie had drawn spiders all over in red sharpie.

"Am I early?" Richie asked, looking around. He was almost always the last to arrive to anything the Losers planned as a group, despite the fact he was the only one with his own car.

"No, I called and told you an earlier time than everyone else because you're always late," Stan replied sagely, the smug look back on his face.

Richie wanted to be offended, but he was mostly impressed and weirdly flattered that Stan knew him well enough to take his consistent lateness into account when he made plans.

"That's fair," Richie shrugged, collapsing himself into the armchair. Bonuses of arriving early meant he got to pick a comfortable seat for once - usually he ended up on the floor unless he could convince Eddie or Bev to share.

"Also I wanted to talk to you alone," Stan added. He was still standing in the shadows but Richie could see he looked almost nervous.

Richie went cold with panic for a second, but managed to turn his choked noise into an overly dramatic gasp as he turned himself in the armchair to face Stan properly.

“Are you finally going to confess your undying love for me, Mr Darcy?” he cried, and Stan rolled his eyes.

“You wish,” he muttered, then his face softened. “We didn’t get to finish our conversation before.”

Richie almost wanted to pretend he had no idea what Stan was talking about, but Stan was mostly immune and completely sick of Richie’s bullshit by now, so that wasn’t an option.

“Is there anything else to say?” Richie asked. “I’m sort of gay. You’re fine with it. Everything’s-.”

“You’re bisexual,” Stan interrupted, then made a face. He paused, looked at his hand, then looked back up to Richie with a nod. “Bisexual,” he said again, sounding more sure this time.

“Is that an insult? Are you insulting me right now?” Richie felt like he was making the same face Stan had been, and he muttered the word under his breath to see how it sounded to him, how it settled in his head. Stan rolled his eyes.

“I asked Ben-” Stan began, and Richie interrupted, throwing his arms up as a shock of fear darted up his spine.

“You told *Ben*? Stan, that’s not cool,” Richie said, voice panicked. But Stan was shaking his head, hands held up like a surrender.

“No I didn’t tell Ben, dumbass. Although I think you *should* tell the others, because-” Richie cut Stan off again, pointing at him.

“Get to the point, Stanley,” he demanded. Stan rolled his eyes but conceded.

“I asked Ben if there was such a thing as liking boys *and* girls, y’know? Like a word. I thought Ben would know how to find something like that out. So we went to the library and looked it up,” Stan looked down at his hand again, and Richie realised there was

writing scrawled across his palm. "Bisexual means you're not just into either guys or girls, and it's been around since the 1800's or something. I don't know if that fits you, but..." Stan shrugged, the end of his sentence fading away as he looked at Richie expectantly.

Richie said the word to himself a little bit louder this time. He thought of it scribbled across Stan's hand, thought of him and Ben surrounded by books in the library, looking through mountains of text just to find a word Richie could have as his own. Richie had heard every insult that could have possibly been thrown his way, and now Stan was stood in front of him offering up a word with no hate attached to it, and it made a lump form in Richie's throat.

"Thanks Stan. You're the best," Richie said. His voice was quiet, but it was all his own with no jokes, and Stan's chest puffed up with pride as he smiled at Richie.

"I know." Stan nodded, then frowned. "Oh, and Ben thinks I'm gay now, so thanks for that," he added making Richie laugh loudly. Stan really was the best.

"No, he thinks you're *bisexual*," Richie corrected, grinning wide. Stan was shaking his head tiredly, but Richie could see him biting his cheek to stop his smile.

Eddie was the first to make it to the clubhouse after Stan and Richie, because he was always ridiculously early to everything. When he got there Richie was hanging upside down off the chair and banging his hands against his stomach in time with the music Stan had put on. Stan was sat in the corner still, half hidden in the shadows and shuffling through polaroids again. Richie had asked what the photos were for but Stan had just glared at him and hidden them from view, so Richie decided they were definitely photos of plants that Richie would make fun of him for.

When Richie saw upside-down Eddie from where he was sprawled out, his face broke into a grin that got even wider when Eddie returned it.

"You're here early," Eddie said, and then, "Have you smoked today?"

Richie frowned and sat himself upright as Eddie made his way over with his back to Stan, staring at Richie with an expression Richie couldn't work out, upside-down or not.

"Uh, no. I ran out. Why?" Richie asked, glancing to Stan behind Eddie. He was waiting for Stan to scare Eddie too like he had when Richie had showed up, because Eddie's scream could break glass, and it was always hilarious.

Eddie didn't answer the question. Instead he leant down to kiss Richie, one hand tangled in Richie's hair and the other resting on his thigh. For a few seconds Richie completely forgot there was someone else in the room as he grabbed Eddie's shirt and melted into the kiss, revelling in Eddie's grip on him tightening when Richie pulled him closer.

"Wow," came a calm voice from the corner, and Eddie sprung backwards with a screech, spinning around to face Stan who looked like he was trying desperately hard not to laugh.

"Oh yeah. Eds, Stan is here," Richie said dumbly, hand still held out from where he'd been gripping Eddie's shirt before he'd jumped away. Richie could feel laughter bubbling up in his chest too when he saw how Stan's eyebrows had shot into his hairline and his fist was jammed into his mouth to stop himself from laughing. Stan was safe; he knew Richie's secret and he'd taken care of it, so Richie wasn't worried about him knowing another.

Eddie spun back around to glare at Richie.

"Well I see that *now*, dipshit. Could you not have told me that before?" Eddie stopped, his face slowly growing more and more crimson as he wrung his hands together and took a few gigantic steps away from Richie and back to the ladders, as if it would reverse time somehow.

"I didn't have a *chance* to tell you before you stuck your tongue down my throat," Richie retorted, still trying his best to hold down laughter to stop Eddie from combusting completely.

Eddie made a strangled noise, digging his fingers into his eyes, and

Stan was leant against the wall with his hands over his face now, muffled snorts still escaping through his fingers.

“I know I’m irresistible, but you really should have checked the room for peeping Stans first,” Richie added.

“Rude,” Stan interjected.

“Fuck you,” Eddie hissed, but it sounded wrong.

Eddie was wheezing with every second breath, the rattling, whistling kind of breathing that told Richie his throat was closing up with panic. Both Stan and Richie seemed to notice at the same time and rushed towards where Eddie was standing.

“Woah, Eds, it’s okay,” Richie said softly, reaching out to touch Eddie but drawing back when Eddie flinched away. Eddie was scared, he’d told Richie just as much the night before. Even if Stan was a friend - Richie remembered being just as scared when he’d first told Stan about liking guys despite that, too - it didn’t stop the fear, Richie should have known that.

“I won’t tell anyone, I swear,” Stan said quickly, knowing that was what Eddie cared about the most.

Eddie was still wheezing, his breaths rasping in and out as his chest heaved, and Richie wanted to wrap an arm around him or tangle their fingers together but knew it wouldn’t help. Eddie crumpled in on himself and ended up sitting on the floor, legs sprawled out and his torso curled over, hand braced on the floor as he tried his best to slow down his breathing.

Richie had seen Eddie through plenty of panic attacks over the years. Sometimes it seemed like there was no reason for them, just that Eddie’s breathing gotten out of control until Eddie was shaking and gasping like he was drowning. He’d used to rely on his inhaler, and Richie found himself wishing he still had his spare, even though they knew it was bullshit. Richie sat himself down on the ground cross legged in front of Eddie and rested his fingers on Eddie’s shin, beginning to drum his fingers in a steady four beat pattern. Eddie’s teeth were chattering as his head dropped forward so he could watch

Richie's fingers.

"Do you remember when we all decided to stay outside one night to stargaze?" Richie began talking, trying his best to keep his voice level and slow. He saw Stan move over to the radio and turn it off so that the room was quiet other than Eddie's rasping breaths and Richie's voice.

"We chose the coldest night of the year and you kept insisting we were going to freeze to death, but we sat out on the edge of that big rock by the quarry all night anyway," Richie's fingers were still drumming against Eddie's knee, and Eddie was trying to breath in time, eyes shutting tight. Richie kept talking.

"You wore four sweaters and your mom's giant coat and still bitched about the cold, but Mike showed us all of the different constellations, and you and Stan lost your shit when you saw a shooting star." in the corner of Richie's eye he saw Stan smile, and he thought he saw the hint of a smile on Eddie's face too as he nodded jerkily.

"Apus was my favourite constellation," Stan added softly.

"Of *course* your favourite would be one to do with birds," Richie teased, feeling relieved when Eddie managed to choke out a laugh before gasping in another wobbly breath.

Richie talked and talked, ending up naming as many constellations as he could remember with the help of Stan who sat beside Richie, holding onto his sleeve. After the clown Eddie's panic attacks had gotten worse, and though he knew his asthma had been something made up by his mother, the fear that closed up his throat and froze his lungs was very real. When they first went back to school after that summer Richie had found Eddie slumped against the lockers in an empty hallway just after morning classes had started, curled in on himself and struggling to breathe.

"How can I help?" Richie had asked, flapping his hands around Eddie uselessly.

"Talk," Eddie had wheezed out, his eyes were shining with fear but he had a grim determination set on his face, fighting the panic that

was trying to overwhelm him. “Distract me.”

So Richie had talked, he’d sang, he’d tapped out drum beats on the floor with some pencils and waited until Eddie could breathe easily again.

It wasn’t foolproof, but it helped Eddie enough to get past it. They hadn’t known what it was until Richie had mentioned it to Beverly and she’d told him it was a panic attack, that her aunt had told her about them after Bev had one after waking up from a nightmare.

“It’s like this feeling that you’re going to die. Even though you know that you’re safe, it messes your whole body up anyway,” she’d said. She told Richie smoking helped her, as well as counting out loud. Richie had taken the smoking idea for himself and the counting idea for Eddie.

Richie never really mentioned it, but he had them too. They weren’t like Eddie’s though, or like Bev had described hers. It was an overwhelming itch under his skin, like bugs were burrowing and crawling there as his head spun and breath caught as if he’d just rode the drop on a rollercoaster. Richie’s had come like clockwork for a while, every night in the early hours of the morning when he’d end up curled on his bed trying to convince himself to calm down. Cigarettes helped, like Bev had said, and a couple of his mother’s super strong painkillers she kept tucked away in the bathroom cabinets helped too. Eddie, Richie, and Bev had all found their ways to cope - some were just healthier than others.

Eddie’s panic attack in the clubhouse was the first one Richie had seen in a long time, and Richie felt overwhelmed with guilt that it was partially his fault.

“*Fuck,*” Eddie choked out eventually, slumping forward so his forehead was resting on Richie’s shoulder. “That sucked.”

Richie stayed still, letting Eddie lean into him, and tried to even out his breathing too. He absently wondered if panic attacks were contagious, and then brushed the thought away as he gave Eddie’s knee a squeeze.

Stan was still sitting next to Richie, and leaned over so that he could awkwardly pat Eddie's back. Stan had seen plenty of Eddie's panic attacks over time too, but still looked a little bit pale when he caught Richie's eye. All of Richie's friends had an almost unimaginable fear buried deep inside them, and it only made sense that it would show up sometimes to remind them of what they'd tried so hard to forget. Richie's manifested into a buzz under his skin, an itch he couldn't scratch until it got too much and burst out of him. Eddie's had turned into something explosive, his panic coming out in frenzied bursts that swallowed him up like wildfire. Richie knew that Stan kept all of his fears carefully stored away with shaking hands, folding them up and finding a place for them, trying to tuck them up tight enough that they couldn't escape. But they came out anyway, in strange little tics that made him twitch or scratch at the skin on his forearm until it was red and raw. Richie used to think Stan had it all together, that Stan was untouchable, but he knew better than that now.

"So," Stan said after a few minutes of silence. Richie was surprised Stan beat him to it, but he had been too busy listening to Eddie's breathing. "You two are a thing now, huh?"

"Do you *want* me to start hyperventilating again, Stanley?" Eddie snapped, but when he looked up he was smiling. It was a wobbly smile, but it was there.

"I always hoped I'd take your breath away, Eds, but I didn't mean it *literally*," Richie said slyly, hoping to keep Eddie's smile for a little longer.

"Hilarious," Eddie rolled his eyes. The smile stayed put for a few seconds before it started to waver. "I've been getting them a lot again lately. Not in front of my mom, thank *god*, she'd have me in hospital for at least a month. I think it's to do with-" Eddie stopped and waved his hands around vaguely, but both Stan and Richie knew what he meant. Moving away, leaving Derry, losing their friends. All of them had been feeling it lately, even if they barely talked about it, the tension followed them around like a dark cloud.

"I meant what I said," Stan said with a short nod. "I promise I won't tell anyone."

Eddie reached over to give Stan's arm a squeeze in thanks, before scowling at him.

"Whilst you're making promises, will you promise to stop hiding in corners and scaring the shit out of me?" he muttered darkly. Stan just grinned in response, colour slowly coming back to his cheeks.

The others flooded in soon after, and Richie gave up the armchair for Eddie to sit on and took the floor instead, leaning against Eddie's leg so he could keep listening to his breathing. It was still a little bit raspy but Eddie greeted his friends with a beaming smile and laughed loudly when Bev squeezed in next to him on the tiny chair. Richie figured the moment had passed for now, and the sirens that had been going off around them finally died down into nothing. Richie let himself relax but kept himself close to Eddie, and he noticed Stan keeping an eye on him too.

Richie hated the thought that Eddie's anxieties had gotten worse recently because he was leaving. As he looked around the room Richie wondered if all the others were coping as well as Richie thought they had been, or if they were all struggling just as much.

Stan brought one of the milk crates from their makeshift table into the middle of the clubhouse and sat down on it, staring at all of his friends. He had his legs crossed and looked so serious that Richie immediately burst out laughing, earning a glare from Stan.

"All you need is a cat and a tux and you'd be the *perfect* Marlon Brando, Stanley," Richie wheezed out. He could hear Bev laughing behind him, and Ben was hiding his face as if he was trying not to laugh too.

Richie had been doing his Godfather impression whenever he got the chance since he first saw the film. It was his favourite, but the others - especially Eddie - hated it. Richie didn't care. "You come into my house on the day my daughter is to be married," Richie began, squinting at Stan and pretending to pet a cat in his lap. He heard both Eddie and Stan groan, and he grinned delightedly. "And you ask me to do murder - for money."

Stan glared at Richie, holding his hand up. "All in favour of

Trashmouth leaving so we can actually talk like normal people, say aye.”

There was a chorus of agreement around the room from everyone other than Bev and Ben who were still laughing.

“Wow, you are all terrible friends,” Richie muttered, slouching down and flipping Stan off, who returned it with a blank face.

It turned out Stan wanted to figure out when everyone was leaving Derry, and then wanted to plan a party for them all. Eddie was leaving first, with Bill following the same weekend, Ben two weeks after, and Stan a month after that. Mike shrugged and told them he didn’t know, ducking his head, and Bev shrugged too, tapping Richie’s head.

“When do you want to go, Richie?” she asked, and all of the others turned to frown at him.

“W-w-wait. You g-guys are going t-tu-t-together?” Bill asked, and Richie grinned.

“We’re eloping,” he said with a nod. “She asked me to marry her.”

Bev tugged on Richie’s ear, giggling. “We’re not eloping, but we are moving to Detroit together.”

There was another chorus of noise, this time cheers from their friends, apart from Stan who raised an eyebrow. “You’re *voluntarily* choosing to live with Richie Tozier?” he asked incredulously, and Eddie cackled.

“You’ve seen Richie’s room, right?” Eddie asked Bev. “Imagine that but your *whole apartment*. Dirty clothes everywhere, random shit he’s found and refuses to throw away like that fucking traffic cone he stole. I found a month old bagel under his bed once, too.” Richie remembered the bagel incident well. Eddie had refused to come to Richie’s house for three weeks after until Richie promised he’d cleaned his room out multiple times with every cleaning product known to man.

Bev just shrugged, looking undeterred. “We’ll get by,” she said, and

Richie grabbed her hand so he could kiss her knuckles, heart bursting with fondness. He knew there was a reason he'd found it so easy to say yes to Bev asking him to go with her.

Stan muttered a "good luck" under his breath and Richie flipped him off again.

Stan had ripped out seven pieces of paper and handed them all out to each of his friends along with some pens which Richie immediately used on Eddie's skin, twisting his body around so that he could scrawl a long line across Eddie's forearm before he snatched it away.

"We all need to write our new addresses so we can contact each other when we move," Stan instructed whilst Richie grabbed Eddie's hand again and opened up his palm, drawing a tiny wobbly heart right in the middle. Eddie immediately curled his hand into a fist when he saw it, but he was biting his lip to try and hide his smile.

It took Richie longer than he would've liked to notice Bev was crying, too busy drawing a dick on Eddie's wrist whilst he tried to pull away, but when there was a loud snuffle, everybody froze.

Bev had tears streaming down her face, dropping onto the paper she was holding, and the room went dead silent, the others not knowing what to do. Richie had only ever seen Bev cry a handful of times, and he knew she hated anyone seeing her cry.

"Hey," Richie said softly. He reached out and took her hand at the same time Eddie put his own hand on her knee, and Bev started to cry even harder, shaking sobs echoing around them. Bev was trying her best to hide her face away, whole body shaking.

"I just need a minute," Bev mumbled, dropping Richie's hand and shaking Eddie off to stumble out of the chair and out of the clubhouse, and all of the others looked stricken. None of them had cried that hard in front of each other since that summer, and it took Richie a few seconds to convince his body to move before he hauled himself up to follow Bev.

She was sat just outside of the clubhouse folded in on herself with an unlit cigarette between her lips, and Richie gently reached over to

take it from her so he could light it before handing it back. She muttered a thanks as Richie sat opposite her, lighting a cigarette for himself and watching her carefully. It felt way too similar to Eddie's panic attack from just an hour before, and it made Richie ache with sadness.

"Is leaving getting to you too?" he asked softly. Bev nodded, then changed her mind and shook her head, curling further in on herself and wrapping her arms around her middle.

"No further questions?" Richie asked - this time in his news reporter voice - curling his hand to hold an invisible microphone to his chest. Richie had started that line when he didn't want to talk anymore, when talking about something had unsettled all of the bad feelings inside of him and he needed to take a break from it. The others had caught on quickly and started using it too - Richie had proudly called it the "universal beep beep" - and it gave them all a chance to step away from something without anyone else bringing it back up.

But this time, Bev shook her head. "No," she said, "I want to tell you, I think I-I *need* to tell you, but I don't know how."

Bev's cigarette was burning down and spilling ash as she held it limply between her fingers, so Richie took it off her, stubbing it out before it burned her fingers.

Bev had spent a lot of time biting back her feelings and keeping them quiet around her father, so her thoughts often became a muddle in her head that needed a chance to untangle. Richie had gotten pretty good at nudging her in the right direction, of coaxing words out of her. "It was when Stan was asking us to write our addresses, right? Are you worried that we don't have an apartment yet?" Richie guessed, but Bev shook her head again.

Richie took a deep breath. He really hoped Bev wasn't having second thoughts about inviting him along, but he had to ask. "Do y- would you rather we didn't go together?"

Bev looked to Richie, saw how he was picking at his fingers and tapping his foot against the floor, and she sighed, face sympathetic. "Of course not. This has nothing to do with you," she said softly,

getting up from where she sat to sit beside Richie instead, leaning into his side.

Richie put out his own cigarette on his boot before wrapping an arm around Bev's shoulders in turn, and she took a shaky breath, wiping at her eyes with her free hand.

"When the-" she started. Another wobbly breath. Richie gave her arm a squeeze. "When I was in the deadlights, I saw so much. I barely made sense of all of it."

Richie nodded, trying to push down the anxiety that prickled at the tips of his fingers. He remembered them all talking about it, sat in a circle trying to regroup, trying to figure out how they'd get back to normality after what they'd seen. "You saw us all as adults," he remembered. Bev had refused to tell them all much, but she'd smiled fondly as she talked about them all, her eyes glazed over like she was somewhere else entirely.

"Not just that," Bev said, and Richie felt her shiver. "I can't remember most of it, and I tried not to because it was so *weird*, like being in a dream. But when Stan started talking about us all leaving it came back to me."

Bev was crying again, tears silently running down her face, and Richie felt cold all over. Whatever it was, it was bad.

"We forget, Richie," Bev said quietly, turning to look at him. Her eyes were glassy like they had been before, her face pale as she bit down on her lip so hard blood burst beneath her teeth. "We move away and we forget any of this happened."

A cold lump settled in Richie's stomach, but he shrugged it off with a frown. "Isn't that a good thing?" He asked. "I don't want to remember that shitty clown for the rest of my life. If moving away makes us forget it, then I wanna go tomorrow," Richie had meant for his voice to sound cheerful, but it faded away when he saw Bev shaking her head.

"We forget *each other*," she whispered, quiet, like she thought saying it any louder would make it come true there and then. Richie felt like

he had known it was coming somehow, like he'd heard Bev say it before she actually did. He covered his face with his hands, knocking his glasses to the floor as he scratched down his face with his nails, his heart hammering.

Bev kept on talking, like floodgates had been opened. "We leave and we all forget Derry, we forget the clown, and we forget each other. We're all so sad too, like we know something's missing but we don't know what." Bev had dark rings under her eyes, her face crumpled in a way Richie had never seen before.

Richie should've sent Ben after Bev, or Bill, or Stan, they'd have known how to deal with this. "We need to tell the others," he said, jumping to his feet and then swearing loudly when he heard a familiar snap underneath his boot.

Bev picked up Richie's glasses from under his foot. The glass hadn't broken, but it had snapped down the middle at the bridge, and one of the arms had fallen off. Both of them groaned, and Richie took the mud covered parts of his glasses in his hands, staring down at them. It seemed like something so small now, so pointless after what Bev had just told him.

"We need to tell them," Richie said again, and Bev nodded, leading the way back to the clubhouse to their waiting friends.

Richie immediately made his way over to Eddie, crawling into the non-existent space on the armchair next to him and handing him his broken glasses. Eddie didn't push Richie away, he just looked to the glasses, then to Richie's face, and silently hooked their ankles together. Richie wanted to cry.

"Wow, did Bev finally lose it and punch you in your stupid face?" Eddie joked, holding up the pieces of the glasses. Richie tried to laugh but it came out as just a weak puff of air, and Eddie gave him a questioning look. Richie shook his head.

Bev sat herself in the middle of the room beside Stan who made space for her on his milk crate, and she told them what she'd told Richie. She explained more this time, about how she'd seen fragments of them all when they were older, but couldn't work out what they were

doing.

"I just knew we were all sad, somehow," she said. "And we all felt really far away from each other. I didn't even recognise any of us at first."

Richie blindly reached out and grabbed Eddie's hand, and Eddie jumped slightly before he made his mind up and held on tight, grounding Richie to the moment. Richie looked around through blurred vision and saw his friends all looking varying degrees of horrified. It looked like Mike had tear tracks on his face, Stan had his arm around Beverly, face pale as he stared at nothing, Bill had his head in his hands, and Ben's eyes were wide, his jaw hanging slack.

Richie couldn't look at Eddie, so he fixed his eyes on the broken pieces of his glasses resting on Eddie's knee. This didn't feel fair, like after everything they'd dealt with and done as a team, as a family, this was one last blow the clown wanted to get in before they escaped.

It was Bill who spoke first, because of course it was.

"W-w-we can't let it d-d-d- *fuck*." Bill stopped to breathe, then stood up and curled his hands into fists. "*Do this to us*," he spat out. "We m-made an oath to always s-st-stick together." All of the Losers looked down at their hands instinctively, running their eyes or fingers over the ragged scars across their palms. Richie's hand was still in Eddie's, so he just ran his thumb across the pulse point in Eddie's wrist instead.

Bev hung her head, looking miserable. "We don't have a choice Bill. We can't stop it, but we can't stay here." Richie was almost selfishly glad he got to stay with Bev, that he'd at least get to keep one of his friends. He squashed down the thought the second it came to him, knowing it wouldn't be the same, that he loved and needed all of his friends for different reasons. It had always been the seven of them against the world, as one unit together. Richie wanted to keep all of them.

They all fell silent again, and Richie wanted to make a joke, or do a voice or even sing a song just to see his friends smile again. But he

felt like he'd been wrung out, all his nerves exposed and body not really his own. So he stayed quiet, shut his eyes, and focused on breathing.

When Eddie spoke Richie jumped a little, and Eddie gave his hand one more squeeze in apology before letting go.

"Shit, you've really messed up these glasses. You're a fucking idiot, Richie," he said, voice a little too loud to be natural. He fiddled with the pieces of the glasses in his hand, not looking at anyone. "Bev, do you have a hairpin? And Mike, can you pass me those pliers by your head? I just need to-" Eddie was rambling, his voice high and raspy as he took what he needed from Mike and Bev and settled the pieces of Richie's glasses on the arm of the chair. Richie watched as he put the arm back on by shoving a part of Bev's hairpin through the pinhole, twisting it around with pliers so it was secure. Then he pulled a bright yellow band-aid out of his pocket and used it to wrap the bridge together so that everything was in one piece again.

He put them back on Richie's face gently, and it was only then that Richie realised Eddie's hands were shaking. Richie couldn't imagine ever forgetting Eddie. Not his high pitched voice when he got mad, or the smile that made his eyes scrunch up, or the way he fit into Richie's side so easily, like he was made to be there. But Richie had also learnt there were too many things out of his control, things he couldn't even dream of comprehending; evil as old as the stars that had a hold on Richie and all of his friends.

Eddie looked at Richie for a second longer, fingers brushing gently across his temples as he straightened up the glasses before turning back to the room. Richie kept his eyes on Eddie. There was a smudge from Eddie's thumbprint on the right lens of his glasses, but Richie didn't wipe it away.

Ben piped up next. His eyes were still wide but he was tapping his finger against his knee like he always did when he was trying to figure something out.

"We can't forget each other if we keep talking, right? What if we write ourselves reminders and we keep writing each other letters or calling or whatever?" his voice was bright but it sounded forced. Bev

looked like she wanted to cry again.

Stan was nodding, and he started to come up with a plan of writing addresses and making sure everyone kept a diary to jog their memories. Bill joined in, talking about keeping photos and making sure everyone had stacks of postcards from the library when they left. Richie loved his friends so much he could barely stand it.

He started to scribble on the piece of paper Stan had given him, and Eddie leant over to look, snorting when he saw what Richie was doing. Richie had drawn a stick figure of himself, with wild curly hair, legs longer than the rest of his body, and lopsided glasses too big for his face. Underneath he wrote: *Richie Tozier. The best person you'll ever meet. Devastatingly handsome and absolutely hilarious.*

"Should we all do self portraits for each other?" he asked, turning the paper towards the room. He managed to get a smile out of Bev, Mike, and Ben, and eye rolls from Bill and Stan.

"You're so full of shit," Eddie muttered next to him.

Richie turned to smirk at Eddie, before he drew a much, much smaller stick figure beside his. The eyebrows were together in a V shape and the mouth was a huge frown, with wobbly legs and tiny shorts. Under this one he wrote: *Eddie Kaspbrak. Super fierce. Very small. Cute but not as cute as Richie.*

Eddie was swearing and trying to snatch the paper off of Richie who was holding it just out of reach. Eddie laughed as he put a hand on Richie's chest as leverage to reach up and grab the paper, and Richie relented and gave it up, grinning in return to Eddie's glare. Things felt almost close to normal again, despite the dark cloud above their heads.

"Asshole," Eddie muttered as he settled back down. He scrunched the paper up but shoved it into his pocket instead of throwing it away, still glaring at Richie as he did.

The air around them was still fraught, everyone reeling, feeling grief settle into their bones. Richie would have taken never seeing his friends again but still getting the chance to miss them and the

memories they'd made over forgetting everything. They had so much time to lose and so many precious things to forget that the loss of it all felt like it would eat Richie up completely.

Eddie had frozen up again, like he was hanging by a thread, so Richie used the pen to draw a line across Eddie's cheek, making him squeal and smack at Richie's hands. "Stan, tell us all about this party you want to throw," Richie announced loudly. Stan had gotten too quiet, face pale and shoulders hunched.

Stan jumped - he'd been stuck staring at the same point for a few moments - but slowly started to speak once Richie snapped him out of it, his words stilted for a while before he warmed into it.

The others began to join in too, throwing in suggestions or bickering about who got to control the music. Richie watched Bev start to smile a little more - small but definitely there - and when she caught Richie's eyes she blew him a kiss which Richie caught dutifully before turning and slapping it onto Eddie's cheek, making Bev giggle quietly. Eddie turned himself to face Richie, tucking his toes underneath Richie's thighs and slinging his arm across the back of the chair so that his fingers were only just touching Richie's shoulder. Richie couldn't imagine forgetting any of the moments he and his friends had together, even the ones where nothing interesting happened. It seemed an impossible thing that soon he'd forget what colour Bill's eyes were, or how much Stan liked birds, or that Mike gave the best hugs.

Eddie raised his fingers on Richie's shoulder up so he could tug at Richie's hair, and when Richie turned his head he saw Eddie was already smiling at him. Eddie was a force of nature with a permanent place, loud and bright, in Richie's heart. Forgetting Eddie seemed like the most impossible thing in the world.

Richie smiled back, shooting a wink at Eddie that made him scoff because Richie couldn't wink without closing both eyes, but it always made Eddie laugh. They'd all be ok, Richie thought to himself, looking back around the room at all of his friends. Even if they couldn't change the fact they were going to forget, Richie hoped they could change their futures a little. *We're all so sad*, Bev had said, and that's what stuck with Richie the most. Richie wanted to make a deal

with the universe, wanted to make it promise that even if all of them forgot each other, that his friends got to be happy with whatever lives they ended up in. He figured the universe owed them at least that much.

*

Richie had started going down to Mike's farm on weekends a few years back when he'd run out of things to do and was sick of sitting in his room alone. It quickly became the norm that Richie would show up every other weekend and share Mike's chores without them ever talking about it.

Richie liked doing the farm work, he liked making his muscles burn and his chest heave, and he always slept the best after he'd spent a day at Mike's.

After the clown-related bomb that had been dropped on them all earlier, Richie felt more than ever like he needed to let off some steam.

As always Mike didn't say a thing when Richie turned up at the farm a couple of hours after the clubhouse meeting, he just handed him a pair of gloves and asked for help moving straw bales.

Mike usually let Richie talk about whatever he wanted, humming agreements or interjecting every now and again. Most of the time when people did that to Richie they weren't listening to him, they were just letting him talk it out. But Mike was always listening to Richie, even if what he was talking about was ridiculous.

"Can you imagine how cool a miniature cow would be? I'm thinking Labrador sized so it could fit in the house. I'd buy one of those adorable bastards in a heartbeat," Richie said excitedly, huffing as he threw another bale down to Mike waiting below.

Mike laughed under his breath shaking his head.

“Cows smell bad, and they’re kind of dumb. One almost crushed me when I was a kid,” he grunted as he threw the bale onto the back of his dad’s truck, bits of straw sticking to his shirt.

“*That’s* why you make them smaller!” Richie waggled his finger down at Mike who laughed even harder. “You can’t crush a person if you barely reach their knees right?”

“If I ever come across mini-cows in the future, I’ll let you know,” said Mike, sighing and stretching out whilst Richie sat himself down on one of the bales, running his sleeve across his forehead. His arms were aching and his heartbeat was thudding through his ears but he felt good about it because there was no uneasiness to it like there normally was. Richie always felt like he had way too much energy to burn buzzing through his body and making him ache. He’d used to pedal around on his bike for hours when he was younger, trying to get rid of it, jittery and uncomfortable. Working with Mike made him uncomfortable in a way that he could recognise, the buzzing replaced with peaceful weariness.

“I bet you can’t wait to get the fuck out of here and away from all your chores,” Richie said, grinning down at Mike, who ducked his head and shrugged, body suddenly tense.

“I’m not leaving, Richie,” Mike replied quietly. “I can’t.” Richie’s stomach dropped.

“You *can’t*? What, are your folks banning you or something?” Richie frowned, but Mike was already shaking his head.

“No they want me to leave, actually,” Mike sat himself down too, turning away from Richie.

“So what the fuck is the problem?” Anxiety was rippling through Richie’s body, though he couldn’t work out why.

“Richie, It’s not dead,” Mike turned then to look up at Richie, and he suddenly looked twenty years older, his eyes dark and tired.

“How the hell would you know that?” Richie threw his hands up, his

voice cracking a little. They'd rarely spoken about It directly since they made their oath, but all of the Losers knew that they hadn't stopped the clown for good. Richie sometimes felt like he could feel It under his feet; dark energy humming underneath him, waiting for it's time to come back.

"I can feel it, and I know you all can too. It's going to come back and we need to be ready for it," Mike's expression turned determined, and he nodded to himself. "I'm going to stay here and I'm going to keep watch, and then next time we'll be more prepared."

Richie jumped himself down from the bales to sit closer to Mike, leaning against him whilst Mike propped his elbows on his knees and hid his head in his hands.

"You can't throw your life away for this," Richie pleaded. He remembered Mike's wistful face as he told his friends about his plans to go to Florida, towards the sunshine.

"It's not throwing my life away, not if I get to save people," Mike mumbled into his hands, but Richie was already shaking his head.

"We don't owe this town *shit*, Mike," Richie said sourly. All of the Losers had targets on their backs for various reasons, but even the adults didn't hide their hatred for Mike and his family. Richie didn't want to imagine Mike living in Derry any longer than he had to. He deserved so much better.

But Richie also knew Mike was as stubborn as Richie was. He had made his mind up and there was no changing it. Mike just shrugged, not bothering to argue, and Richie sighed and leaned his head on Mike's shoulder. Richie thought of Mike alone in Derry without the others, keeping people who never cared one bit about him protected from something they didn't even know about, and his heart hurt.

Richie wanted to promise to Mike that he'd visit, that they'd all stay in touch and throw plenty of family reunions. But if what Bev said was true, then it meant Mike would be completely alone. He'd be the only one left with the memories of Derry - unless those memories left with the Losers too - and all he'd have would be an empty, hateful town.

“If you’re not leaving,” Richie began, before frowning and adding “Which is a fucking dumb decision, I hope you know.” Mike huffed and shook his head, but Richie barrelled on. “If you still remember us, I want you to keep reminding us. Don’t think you have to be the hero and let us get this weird amnesia shit then suddenly ring us whenever that stupid clown comes back telling us it’s time for another battle to the death. I want you to keep us connected Mike, keep being our friend.”

“Isn’t it better if you all just forget? Get on with your lives?” Mike asked, and Richie scowled.

“No Mikey, what the fuck? You guys are my best friends. That stupid clown is going to try his best to take us away from each other and we’re going to fight back like we always do. Right?”

Mike’s mouth curled up into a smile, small but genuine, and he slung his arm over Richie’s shoulder.

“Right,” he nodded.

Richie stood back up again, stretching out and climbing his way back to the top of the bales, still feeling uncomfortable and needing to move to try and shake it off. He took a piece of straw and stuck it in his mouth, grinning down at Mike before he began to chew, immediately making a disgusted face. “This tastes gross, why do people do this?”

Mike laughed, shaking his head. “No one does that, Rich. Just in the movies.”

“I always thought it looked cool,” Richie shrugged, sticking the piece of straw behind his ear instead.

They got back to work, and back to talking about pointless things, chattering away as they worked. Mike was back to laughing and joking, the serious expression from before gone, but Richie couldn’t shake off the heavy sadness he felt whenever he thought of Mike staying in Derry. It wasn’t fair that him and his friends had been made to grow up so quickly, responsibilities forced onto them that even they couldn’t properly understand. They all knew they couldn’t

walk away from it though. For some reason they all knew the weight of this, that it was something they were all bound to, whether they wanted to be or not. Richie wondered if they'd ever be able to break ties with that bond, and wondered what they'd have to do, but the minute he thought of it his stomach lurched.

Maybe there was another timeline, another life where he and his friends just got to be kids, without the sewers and glowing eyes and fear so intense you were sure you'd die from it. Richie wondered if they'd still be friends anyway, without that fear connecting them all together. He hoped so.

Mike started singing along with the radio playing from the truck, and Richie joined in, flashing Mike a grin. Bev didn't mention seeing anything about Mike staying, so maybe Mike making that decision could change things for the better. Maybe he could be their link, strong enough to keep them all anchored. Richie hoped desperately that it would be enough.

Mike called up to Richie whilst he was still singing to himself. "Hey, you got time to come into the house and listen to a new band I found? You're gonna like 'em."

Richie grinned again and jumped down from the top of the bales, knowing full well that Mike would stop him from falling on his ass when he landed.

"Betcha they're not as good as the one I introduced you to last week," Richie teased, and Mike rolled his eyes.

"You're about to eat your words, Tozier," he retorted smugly, then his face smoothed out a little, smile becoming kinder. "Hey, how about once you're gone, I keep sending you tapes of new stuff you'll like?"

As much as Richie insisted it was himself, Mike was the best at making mixtapes and finding new bands for his friends. Most of the music Richie liked now was thanks to Mike, who'd even given Richie a bunch of his dad's old vinyls when he'd caught Richie staring at them one day.

“That would be fantastic, Mikey,” Richie said cheerfully, slapping Mike’s back and feeling the cold inside him warm back up with the smile he got in return as they made their way inside.

*

Richie had no idea what the hell Stan had been thinking when he insisted all of the Losers had to *bake* something for their party. Stan had been in full business mode, giving out jobs to the others, writing lists, the whole nine yards. Stan was determined to make this party the *best*, even if it killed him - which was looking likely considering how many times the vein in his forehead had throbbed and how often he’d rolled his eyes so hard that his pupils disappeared.

Ben had suggested getting a cake, and Stan has clicked his fingers and told everyone they needed to bring food.

“We should bake stuff. My mom’s friends always bring their own baked stuff to parties,” said Stan, and Richie snorted.

“Yeah but we’re not fifty year old ladies, Stanley. None of us can cook for shit.”

Stan rolled his eyes again - Richie had counted 38 eye rolls so far, 24 of which were directed at Richie - and glared. “It’s *baking*, not cooking, and it’s not hard.”

Bev had piped up that she thought it was a nice idea, but Eddie grunted and began shaking his head, getting up to pace the room.

“No, nope. Terrible idea. We are absolutely going to give each other food poisoning, or we’ll burn our houses down. Or both.”

Stan had his head in his hands, but Richie was grinning delightedly.

“Tell ‘em about eggs carrying diseases, Eds,” he prompted, and Eddie threw his hands in the air.

“It’s not the eggs. Everyone thinks it’s the eggs but it’s actually *flour*. Did you know raw flour carries E-coli? And E-coli is a bitch. It basically makes you spew up your guts until you die,” Eddie was gesticulating wildly, and Richie had to keep his hands over his mouth to stop himself from laughing - or maybe from telling Eddie how much he loved him, he wasn’t sure - as Eddie ranted.

Bev interrupted Eddie mid-rant, hand raised in the air like he was her teacher. “Why would you eat raw flour, though?” she asked. She was trying her hardest not to laugh too, and immediately broke when Eddie groaned, slapping both of his palms against his own cheeks and dragging his hands down his face.

“It’ll be in the *cake batter*, Bev, and idiots love cake batter. Have you met Richie? He will eat literally anything and I am not nursing him back to health when he goes ahead and eats a bowlful of germs.”

Richie hummed thoughtfully. “A bowlful of germs does sound pretty tasty,” he mused, making Bev laugh even harder.

Eddie took in a deep breath, ready to rant some more, but Stan stopped him by levelling him with a very tired look.

“If Richie wants to kill himself, that’s on him. Making cakes will be fun,” it sounded less like a statement and more like a threat, so everyone shut up and nodded. Bill promised he’d get them a sheet cake from the store just in case, and it turned out Mike actually knew how to bake pretty well, which made Eddie feel slightly better.

Two days later Richie’s kitchen was stacked full of baking ingredients and way too many mixing bowls - he’d asked his mother for equipment but wasn’t exactly specific on how much stuff he needed - and Eddie was leaning against the counter reading through a book full of recipes.

Richie was sat on the kitchen table watching Eddie frown as he read over the recipe for brownies again, muttering to himself.

“You know that’s not a spell book, right?” Richie asked, “the brownies aren’t going to magically appear in front of you if you recite the recipe three times.”

Eddie put the book down to glare at Richie, who grinned right back. There was a bowl by Richie already filled with pre-measured flour that Eddie had checked and rechecked at least eight times, and a broken egg dripping off the countertop that Richie had broken when he'd insisted he knew how to separate yolks. Eddie checked the oven again and then went on to measure the butter, still muttering to himself. Richie was absently running his fingers through the bowl of flour, rubbing it between his fingers then letting it fall, leaving dustings of white on his jeans.

Eddie spoke without turning around, busy measuring out chocolate chips now. "Are you going to help me or are you just going to sit there?"

Richie hummed, making a handprint of flour on his jeans. "You'd just get mad that I wasn't doing it right," he pointed out, smiling at Eddie's long suffering sigh.

Eddie turned just so that Richie could see him roll his eyes but didn't argue, going back to measure cocoa powder, and Richie kept on watching him. He couldn't get it out of his head that every day was one day closer to Eddie leaving, to him and Eddie being separated by so much more than just distance.

Eddie cracked an egg - better than Richie's attempt - but pulled a horrified face at the goop that leaked onto his hand as he turned to Richie and made a pained noise. Richie cackled, delighted by how offended Eddie looked at the yolk stuck on his fingers as if he hadn't been expecting it, and grabbed the towel beside him, motioning Eddie over.

"Calm down Eds, it's just a bit of chicken fetus," Richie said cheerfully, wiping off Eddie's hands for him when he was close enough.

"Fuck you no it's not," Eddie protested, using his newly clean hand to shove at Richie, stepping into the space between Richie's legs. "Store eggs are unfertilized, dumbass."

Richie tapped his nose and reached out to curl his free hand around Eddie's hipbone, keeping him in place. "That's what they want you to

think,” he muttered, waggling his eyebrows and making Eddie laugh so loudly that it echoed through the kitchen.

“You’re so stupid,” Eddie mumbled back before leaning in closer so he could kiss Richie, curling a hand around his cheek and no doubt covering Richie in egg and butter and whatever else he had stuck on his fingers. Richie couldn’t have cared less.

Richie tangled up one hand in Eddie’s hair and hooked one foot around the back of Eddie’s thigh so that he could pull him even closer, heart doing a flip at the pleased noise Eddie made in return. He could never get bored of kissing Eddie. Even though it was still new right now he was almost certain he’d still get the sparks shooting up and down his spine, the tingles in his fingers, and the swell of joy in his chest every time he got the chance to kiss Eddie Kaspbrak.

He absently wished they’d have done something about it sooner, because they’d wasted so much time not being like this, but he pushed it away. They’d been just as good before, and no time spent with Eddie - whether as friends or something else - was ever wasted.

Richie grabbed the front of Eddie’s shirt with his free hand, wanting Eddie closer still, but that was when Eddie looked down and made a squawking sound against Richie’s mouth, before taking a big step back as he stared down at his shirt.

“Are you covered in *flour*? ”

Richie was still a little bit dazed, his heart still thudding, so he made a grunting noise in lieu of an answer.

Eddie sighed and grabbed Richie’s hands, turning them over to see Richie’s fingers were still powdered white from when he’d been drawing patterns in the bowl full of flour. Eddie made an affronted sound before it seemed to slowly dawn on him where Richie’s other hand had been, and he reached up to cautiously touch his hair.

“Did you get flour in my hair?” he asked slowly, grinding his teeth. Richie looked up to see that Eddie’s hair was mostly grey, powdered white running in streaks mixed in with the regular brown.

“Uh,” Richie had to bite his lip to stop himself from laughing. “No?”

Eddie put a hand into his hair and watched a cloud of white puff out in front of his eyes, and his horrified expression turned into a glare.

Richie held his hands up, still trying desperately not to laugh. “If it’s any consolation, I think you look *very* cute with grey hair,” he said, making Eddie’s glare get even more murderous.

“I’m gonna kill you.” Edie replied calmly, one hand still in his hair, the other pointing at Richie.

Before Richie could even think properly about what he was doing, he’d taken the bowl of flour and dumped it on his own head, bowl and all. Flour went straight up his nose and he coughed and spluttered, but he heard Eddie bark out a surprised laugh, so figured it was worth it.

Richie tilted the bowl back on his head so that he could see Eddie laughing so hard he was shaking, clutching his chest and still pointing at Richie.

“Oh my god,” he choked out. “Oh my god you’re such an idiot.”

Richie grinned, taking the bowl off his head so he could shake his hair out like a dog, making clouds of flour fill the room and settle on the surfaces. “Yup,” he replied cheerfully, reaching a hand out to Eddie. “But now we’re even, can we go back to making out?”

Eddie made a face. “Absolutely not. You’re covered in *flour*, Richie, you look like a budget ghost from a shitty horror movie.”

Richie laughed with Eddie this time, and felt warmth boil up in his chest and try to bubble out of his throat when Eddie gently brushed away some of the flour on Richie’s cheek just so he could press a kiss there.

“Am I gonna get that spewing disease now?” Richie asked, taking off his glasses to clean them against his shirt. It barely did anything since his shirt was covered in flour too, and when Eddie noticed he took Richie’s glasses from him, pulling a cloth out of his own pocket to clean them properly.

“Nah,” Eddie shrugged. “I baked the flour before we used it. Get’s rid of the germs.”

It was something so stupid, but Richie’s heart swelled anyway. It was such a fundamentally and completely *Eddie* thing to do, and Richie loved him so much it hurt.

“Does that mean I get to-” Richie started hopefully, but Eddie interrupted.

“No, you can’t eat the brownie batter. Raw eggs are still gross.”

Richie whined, crossing his arms across his chest and sending up another cloud of flour, which set Eddie off laughing again. He was still laughing when he gently put Richie’s glasses back on his face, swiping his thumbs under Richie’s eyes before he moved away.

A sudden twinge in Richie’s body reminded him that he wouldn’t have this for much longer, and then another more hateful stab told him that he’d never have this again. Richie had known Eddie was it for him since they were thirteen, he was pretty sure, and back then Richie had the naivety to think Best Friends Forever and shoddily made friendship bracelets were legally binding somehow.

Richie reached out so that he could link his and Eddie’s pinkie fingers together.

“I’m gonna miss you so much,” he mumbled. It felt like a ridiculous thing to say in a kitchen covered in flour on a sunny Saturday afternoon, the words too dark and heavy for the setting they were in. But they were the words constantly looping around Richie’s head lately, trying to claw their way out, and Richie was never very good at holding his tongue.

Eddie’s eyes shone a little bit as he moved closer so that he could hold Richie’s hand properly, bringing their joined hands up to his chest, leaving more white prints there.

“But you won’t,” he replied, quietly, carefully, like it was something Richie didn’t already know. “You can’t miss someone you don’t even remember.”

Richie didn't think that was true, couldn't believe it. Even though he might not remember Eddie's face or his smile or what he sounded like, Richie was sure he would always miss him for as long as they were apart.

Richie didn't say that though, because he knew Eddie would probably argue back with something much more logical, and Richie didn't want to hear it. Instead he gave Eddie's hand a squeeze and prodded at his knee with his toes, making Eddie's mouth tilt up into a sad smile.

Eddie looked miserable, shoulders rigid as he clung onto Richie's hand so tightly his knuckles turned white. Eddie had mostly ignored the subject of leaving the best he could - like most of the others, bar Stan and Bill who were almost desperate to do something to fix it - but Richie could see on his face how much it hurt.

Richie wanted to talk about it, wanted to hug Eddie tight and tell him to talk about everything he was feeling, but it was too much. Instead he said, "You know who I definitely won't forget?"

Eddie's eyes narrowed, like he knew what was coming. "If you say my mom I swear to-"

"Your mom!" Richie shouted at the same time, cackling. "Who could forget *that* hot bod?"

Eddie scrunched his nose up, shaking his head. But despite himself - despite the fact he hated Richie's jokes about his mom - he started to laugh; gasping giggles making their way out, even though he tried to muffle it with his free hand.

"God, you're so disgusting," he said in between laughter, resting his hip against the edge of the table. The laughter died out, Eddie's face dropped again, Richie gave his hand a squeeze.

"I told her. My mom," Eddie started quietly, moving his and Richie's joined hands away from his chest so he could stare at them instead of looking at Richie. "About New York, I mean. I told her I was going to college."

Richie hadn't been expecting that. He'd figured Eddie would just panic and either decide not to leave at all or run away in the dead of night so his mother couldn't stop him.

"Yeah?" Richie prompted when Eddie's voice died out. He hooked his foot around Eddie's leg again but didn't pull him closer this time, just kept it there to anchor them both.

"She was pretty good about it actually," Eddie mumbled, then when Richie levelled him with a look, he relented. "Ok, so she went fucking batshit. She was as dramatic as you'd expect, collapsed on the floor and everything."

They laughed together, and Eddie let his head drop onto Richie's shoulder despite the fact he was still covered in flour.

"But I told her I was going whether she wanted me to or not," Eddie carried on. Richie felt a surge of pride and turned his head to kiss the top of Eddie's. Eddie usually shrunk back down, became a child whenever his mother pulled something like that. She knew exactly how to get to him, but this time Eddie hadn't backed down. "I think she's gonna follow me to New York. Move there too," Eddie added, and Richie scowled at that.

"Eds, you are not living with your mother in New York. You're gonna be a doctor! You can't be Doctor Mama's Boy, that is not going to help you make friends."

Eddie rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to *live* with her, I have dorms. But if her moving there too is the compromise then I'm okay with that," he shrugged. Eddie would never admit it, but he needed his mother. He hated that he did, but Richie knew she had a special sort of hold on him, and he couldn't shake it. Richie's mother was good and kind, so Richie couldn't even pretend to understand, and almost didn't want to.

"You're gonna wake up in the middle of the night in your dorm room and find her standing over your bed," Richie warned. "She's gonna kidnap you and move you to a storm bunker so you'll never be seen again. And *then* she'll-" Richie was listing off things on his free hand but Eddie interrupted, turning his head to bite Richie's shoulder.

"Shut the fuck up," he laughed. "I'll be fine. She'll hate New York anyway, she'll probably move back to Derry in less than a month."

"And that's when she'll kidnap you!" Richie threw his arms up. "Promise me you'll never move back to this fucking town," Richie held his other hand out - the one with a puckered scar across the palm - and Eddie took it with a nod.

"You have to promise too," Eddie said, and Richie frowned.

"Why would *I* move back? Once I'm gone I'm never coming back to this place," Richie said bitterly. He knew that wasn't exactly true, knew there was a string tied around his finger in the form of a blood oath and a scar that told him one day he would have no choice but to return to Derry eventually.

"You're moving away without any plans, Richie. What if you run out of money? What if you can't find a job - do you even know what you want to *do* for a job? What if Bev changes her mind and leaves you?" Richie had clearly hit a particularly sore point with Eddie, one that made his anxiety pour out in waves. Richie felt terrible that Eddie clearly didn't just have his own move to worry about, but had taken it upon himself to worry about Richie's too. Richie had a feeling that Eddie was worried for his other friends too, holding it all on his shoulders as he so often did.

It was less that Richie had forgotten to think about his move and everything that could go wrong, and more that he was desperately trying not to think about it. Richie was following Bev, trailing after her and her dreams to avoid getting stuck in Derry, but after that he was lost.

"Didn't you hear?" Richie said eventually, managing to rearrange his face back into a grin. "It's my true dream to become homeless."

Eddie didn't laugh this time. Instead he let go of Richie's hands to sling his arms over his shoulders instead, shuffling in so close that Richie went a little cross eyed trying to look at him.

"Rich," he said softly, "Be serious."

"I can't. It makes me break out in hives if I'm serious for too long," Richie joked weakly. Eddie huffed out what was more of a sigh than a laugh and prodded at Richie's cheek with his thumb, prompting him to keep talking.

"I don't know what I want to do," Richie admitted, "I have no idea. I don't even know what I *can* do." Derry wasn't exactly the land of opportunity. Richie had gotten good grades at school, but there was nothing that inspired him, nothing anyone had encouraged him over. His mother had always taught him to be practical and get a good job that paid well, but the thought of it made Richie feel kind of nauseous.

"I'm pretty sure you could talk your way into doing anything you wanted to," Eddie replied. "Do you remember that you wanted to be a ventriloquist when we were kids?"

Richie laughed, nodding his head. He'd gotten fixed on puppets and ventriloquism for a while, and his long suffering parents had bought him books and let him record any kind of puppet show that came on TV. They'd drawn the line at buying Richie an actual puppet because they cost so much money, so Richie had spent some time trying to convince Eddie to be his living puppet since he was small enough to sit on his lap. Eddie hadn't even entertained him with a response.

"I sucked at it," Richie said, still laughing.

"You were terrible," Eddie agreed. "You couldn't stop your mouth from moving, and you kept laughing so hard at your own jokes you couldn't finish."

Eddie and Stan had been the ones who suffered through most of Richie's practices, using his mom's creepy old childhood doll as the dummy. Eddie even made him and Stan score cards, and Richie rarely ever got higher than a three.

"You'll eat your words when I'm a rich and famous ventriloquist with a dummy called Eddie Spaghetti The Grumpy Puppet," Richie reached over to squeeze at Eddie's jaw, making his mouth move, and chuckled as Eddie slapped his hands away.

“Do you still want to be famous?” Eddie shot back, face serious again. They’d talked about it when they were younger - Richie wanting to be on the TV or radio - but Richie had had a lot of dreams back then, before the clown. They all seemed so small now, so pointless. Richie’s childhood and all of his dreams had been taken away too soon to really stick, he supposed.

Richie shrugged. He wanted to make people laugh, had learned exactly what to say and when to say it to get the best from people. He liked making people happy and used to imagine himself making crowds of people laugh, not just his small group of friends.

Eddie looked down when he spoke next, as if he were confessing something terrible. “I wanted to be a runner when I was a kid. Like an Olympian or something,” he mumbled, pulling at a piece of string coming loose at the hem of Richie’s shirt.

“You never told me that,” Richie replied, trying his best not to sound hurt. He figured he and Eddie had told each other everything after years of staying up late at sleepovers, whispering secrets into the dark.

Eddie snorted, shook his head. “Yeah because the second I even *mentioned* it to my mom, she lost her shit,” he muttered bitterly. “Told me all about shin splints and athlete’s foot and that runners always die young of heart attacks. Pretty sure she was one more rant away from putting me in leg braces for the next five years to make sure I never ran again.”

Richie hated Eddie’s mother. He hated how she knew just how to put the seed of doubt in Eddie’s head, convincing him that she knew him better than anyone, including himself. Richie hummed and brushed his knuckles across Eddie’s cheek, opening up his hand when Eddie leant into the touch.

“You were always the fastest out of all of us. Even though you have the tiniest legs,” Richie grinned. He only got a cursory glare from Eddie, like it was a reflex.

Eddie still wasn’t looking at Richie properly, still tugging at the string on Richie’s shirt until it unravelled and got a little longer. Richie

could tell there was something else he wanted to say, so Richie stayed quiet, tried to give him time.

“I don’t know if I even *want* to go to med school,” Eddie admitted quietly, rolling the thread between his fingers until it balled up.

Richie frowned and tilted his head down, trying to catch Eddie’s eye. Over the years, all of their friends had said that Eddie would be an amazing doctor one day, and every time they’d mentioned it Richie could only ever remember Eddie glowing with pride over the compliment. Richie didn’t say that to Eddie now though, knew it wasn’t what he needed to hear. “You know you don’t have to, right?” he asked instead. “You can change your mind.”

Eddie looked up finally, face contorted. “It’s a little late to back out now,” he replied, and it almost tilted up into a question, like he was asking Richie’s permission.

“No, Eddie, you can do what you want to. What-” Richie started, but was interrupted by the door opening and slamming shut, and Eddie was gone from Richie’s space before he could even blink, the loose thread on his shirt dangling down to his knee.

“How goes the baking, chefs?” Bev’s voice called from the hallway, and Richie turned himself on the table so he could face the doorway.

Bev burst into hysterical laughter the second she saw the kitchen covered in flour, and then looked to Richie, dusted white, brandishing a spoon and grinning at her, with Eddie just behind him smiling tiredly.

“We’re ready to open our own bakery,” Richie announced waving the spoon, and Eddie snorted in response.

Bev just raised an eyebrow and leant herself against the doorframe, eyes shining with amusement. She had a backpack slung over her shoulder and a cigarette behind her ear - that was for Richie, he knew because she always keep one there as a reminder to give him it - and there was something else tucked under her arm.

“I brought the map,” she said, taking it from under her arm to wave

it at Richie, "So we can plan our route."

Richie jumped off the table to grab the map and sat himself on the floor, and Bev sat beside him whilst Eddie turned himself back to the counter, mumbling about getting the brownies done before the oven got too hot. Bev had drawn a few lines in different coloured pens, all spanning out from Maine like the spokes of a bike, all eventually wobbling their way towards Detroit. Richie trailed his fingers along them, doing his best accents for whatever state he hit. His fingers skimmed across New York and he thought of Eddie, then he saw one of Bev's lines - the one in red - was going straight through it.

"That one," he said with a decisive nod. He hadn't even looked at the rest of the route, but he knew that one was right. He had a feeling Bev did too, because that particular line was thicker than the others, like she'd gone over it a few times, and when Richie pointed at it she grinned wide.

Bev clapped her hands together, making Eddie jump. "Hey Eddie, c'mere. We have an offer for you," she said cheerfully.

Richie immediately squinted his face up, going back to his Godfather voice, drooping down his mouth and slinging his arm around Bev's shoulders. "We're gonna make him an offer he can't refuse," he rasped, and Eddie rolled his eyes but came over to sit beside Richie anyway, wiping the butter that was on his fingers onto Richie's jeans as he leaned in to look at the map.

Bev tapped at the red line starting at Maine, and dragged it along to New York. "How about one last adventure before we split up?" she asked, voice soft. Eddie's hand was still on Richie's knee from where he'd wiped his fingers, and he dug his nails in a little, expression unreadable.

Eddie didn't want to go to New York, or at least not to med school. A tiny but hopeful spark settled inside Richie, wondering if maybe Eddie would just decide to stay with him and Bev, not leaving them after the first four hundred miles or so, but keeping on going and seeing where that would take him instead.

Eddie's nails were still scratching into Richie's thigh, his shoulders up

around his ears. "I don't - I mean, I'm not sure," he replied quietly, and Richie swallowed down the misplaced hurt. It had seemed so immediately right to him, but he knew Eddie was too much of an overthinker to feel the same.

Instead Richie turned to bump his forehead against Eddie's temple and said, a little too cheerfully, "Being on the road with your two favourite people, what aren't you sure about?"

Eddie's face darkened. "Driving for hours on end with you behind the wheel in your germ infested death trap? Gee, I don't know Richie, what could I *possibly* be hesitating for?"

Bev sniggered on Richie's left, and Richie laughed a little too, trailing a finger across Eddie's knuckles briefly before tapping on the map again.

"I promise I'll keep my eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel at all times. I'll even let you be in charge of the music. We can stop off wherever you'd like, too, there's no rush," Richie hoped he didn't sound like he was begging.

Eddie made a noise that sounded like he'd been winded, looked to the map, to Bev, then to Richie, and slowly his face tilted up into a half smile.

"Yeah, okay," he said quietly, "One last adventure."

The spark that had settled in Richie exploded into something white hot as he hooked his arms around both Bev and Eddie's necks and pulled them into a hug, laughter bubbling out of him. Eddie and Bev hugged back, Eddie turning to bury his nose into Richie's neck as he laughed too, and Richie felt like he'd been given a respite from all of the sadness and grief all of his friends had been feeling lately. He got to keep Eddie for a little while longer, could maybe even convince him to stay even longer still.

Eddie spoke, mumbling against Richie's shirt. "You're cleaning out that shitty car before I go anywhere near it, and we're taking turns driving, I'm not having you falling asleep at the wheel and killing us all. *And* we're planning out this route way better than just drawing a

line across the page, what the fuck.”

Richie kept on laughing, reaching up to run his hand through Eddie’s hair, sending up another cloud of flour. “Whatever you want, Eds,” he said softly, the words a little too close to some kind of truth Richie couldn’t put his finger on.

Eddie sighed loudly, but Richie felt his smile against his shoulder. It felt like a victory.

Bev drew back first to grab the backpack she’d had with her, rummaging around before pulling out a bag of weed and waving it in front of the two boys with a smirk.

“How about we make these brownies a little more interesting?” she asked slyly.

“Oh *fuck* yes,” Richie shouted, at the same time Eddie snapped, “God no.” and both of them turned to glare at each other.

“Come on, Eds, live a little, it’s just-” Richie started, but Eddie interrupted, putting his hand in front of Richie’s face.

“Stop calling me that. Drugs in food is so fucking dangerous, you can’t control how much you have and it can make you have fucking *seizures*, Richie, do you-”

Richie shook his head, talking over Eddie’s rant. “It’s only a little! Stan will be so impressed.”

“Stan will kill you with his bare hands and I’ll help him.” Eddie muttered darkly, but there was a smile on his face that he couldn’t hide.

They compromised and made two batches in between a heated dance battle and an impromptu egg and spoon race across the kitchen. Eddie put flags made out of cocktail sticks in each tray of brownies to show which was which. One said: ‘BAD (weed)’ and the other: ‘GOOD (not weed)’ in big red letters. Richie ate the leftover brownie batter, and Eddie spent the next few hours griping at him for it whilst regularly checking his temperature for a fever, just in case. It was one of the best afternoons Richie had had for a while, and he could easily

see this endless bickering and singing loudly along with the radio going on for hundreds of miles as they all travelled together. Richie was almost getting whiplash from switching to feeling hopeless to almost deliriously happy, but he held on tight to every feeling anyway, and when he caught Eddie watching him with a grin as he and Bev span around the kitchen together, he knew that Eddie was doing exactly the same.

Notes for the Chapter:

chapter title is from [this song](#) and as ever you can find me on [tumblr](#) if you'd like!

thanks for reading <3

4. anywhere with you, I'll call my home

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry for the delay. I wrote 20k words but wasn't at all happy with any of it so I took time off and then rewrote pretty much the whole thing. I did originally say this part was going to be the whole 20k but I've decided to split it in half, and I'll post the next half much quicker (hopefully)

warnings for graphic mentions of blood and gore (Richie's dreams are messing him up), as well as violence and abuse from some real shitty bullies. Take care of yourself, and thanks for reading!

The dreams were getting worse. They were becoming more solid now, merging with the real things Richie had seen in Neibolt to make brand new nightmares that stuck in his head, vivid and hateful.

This time Richie was in the sewers, following behind his friends and calling out to them until his voice was hoarse. He could barely see, stumbling through the shallow stagnant water and squinting his eyes to make out his friend's figures rushing off ahead. Then everything shifted - Richie could feel exactly when things were going to get bad now, but could never wake himself up - and the darkness was suddenly illuminated by yellow lights as the ground began to shake. Richie started to run blindly through the tunnels, an indecipherable roar of noise echoing around him.

Richie caught up to Eddie first, and for a few moments all of the sound and chaos seemed to die out when Richie took a stumbling step forward, reaching for Eddie in the dim yellow light. Eddie gasped, stumbling back, and then his chest split wide open as if he'd been impaled by something invisible. His skin and the fabric of his shirt tore apart with a sickening rip as blood oozed out in time with his pulse, dripping down his torso. Eddie looked like he tried to say something, his mouth opening and lower lip trembling, but all that came out was a whimper as blood trickled steadily out of his mouth.

Richie woke up with a jolt, chest heaving and body shuddering so violently that his teeth were clacking together. He put his head in his

hands, shoving his knuckles into his eyes as he tried to remind himself that it wasn't real, but he could still feel the cold of the sewers, still see Eddie bleeding out in front of him.

Richie was up and out of bed before he could even think about what he was doing, thankful that both his parents were heavy sleepers as he hurried down the stairs and ran out of the front door, only just remembering to stop and lock it behind him. The whole thing was still looping around his head as he ran through the dark streets, the sound of Eddie's skin ripping and the choked whimper he'd made echoing even louder than Richie's thudding steps against the pavement.

His lungs were burning by the time he got to Eddie's house, eyes stinging as he hauled himself up to the window and slithered through the gap into the room. He tried his best to land softly, and to muffle his frantic breaths that were coming out in desperate gasps, too loud for the quiet room.

Eddie was a much lighter sleeper than Richie's parents, so before Richie could even squint to make out his shape in the dark, Eddie sat bolt upright, flailing his arms around to find the lamp by his bed.

Eddie's hair was sticking up in every direction, he had pillow creases across his face, and a line of dribble down his chin. He was *alive*, and Richie wanted to cry. "Wha'?" he croaked. "Rich, wha' time s'it?"

Richie didn't answer. Instead, he made his way over to Eddie's bed and fell into him. It was less of a hug and more just Richie collapsing on top of Eddie's body, putting his head on Eddie's chest to listen to his steady heartbeat and splaying his palm across his stomach. No wound. No blood.

Eddie made a soft noise of surprise but settled one hand on Richie's back anyway, rubbing circles in between his shoulder blades as he buried his other hand in Richie's hair.

Richie let himself breathe. Eddie was ok, he was here and warm and very much alive. Tomorrow, Richie would see his other friends and hug them extra tight too, just to make sure.

The adrenaline drained out of Richie, his heart finally settling into a beat Richie could count rather than a manic hum, and as the blind panic left, it was quickly replaced with a stinging sense of shame for overreacting. Richie and all of his friends knew that bad dreams were part of the deal after what they'd been through. It'd been four years, Richie should have it under control by now, but these more recent nightmares had unsettled something awful and evil in him that he couldn't shove away so easily.

"Sorry," Richie mumbled, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes, shoving his glasses off as he did. He'd at least managed to grab those when he'd woken up - stuck with the feeling that glowing eyes had been watching him in the dark - but he'd left his shoes behind, so had ended up running through the streets barefoot. His feet started to sting belatedly, now that he had time to think about anything other than the fear that felt like it was going to swallow him whole, and Richie winced as he curled his toes. He knew that Eddie was definitely going to give him shit for running around Derry's streets with no shoes, insisting he'd get tetanus or some other horrible disease Richie had never heard of. Knowing Eddie for so long meant Richie could predict his rants pretty easily, and almost knew the scripts of them all by now; it was a stupid thought, but it always made Richie smile anyway.

Eddie sat up with Richie, curling a hand around Richie's wrist and rubbing his thumb across the skin there. He shook his head when Richie apologised, leaning forward to press a kiss to his cheek before bumping their foreheads together. Richie breathed Eddie in, trying to stop himself from shaking so hard.

"Do you want to tell me?" Eddie asked. He was close enough that Richie could see his eyes were still puffy with sleep, and he could tell Eddie was fighting hard to stay awake.

Richie shook his head. He didn't want to relive it again, and didn't want Eddie to hear it either. "Can I stay here, though?"

Eddie snorted, letting go of Richie to drop back onto the bed. "Since when do you ever ask if you can stay in my room? You just turn up whenever you want and then I have to listen to you snore all night."

Richie laughed, and it made the tightness in his chest ease off. “Who said I meant *your* room? You hog the covers and always kick me. I was gonna go share your mom’s bed. She makes an *amazing* big spoon,” he retorted, smirking.

Eddie groaned, throwing his arm over his eyes. “I changed my mind. Go home and suffer,” he muttered, but didn’t protest when Richie laid down beside him, still laughing.

Eddie wiggled closer, nudging at Richie until he turned onto his side before shuffling forward to press his chest against Richie’s back, slinging an arm over his waist. He hooked a leg over Richie’s thigh and buried his face into Richie’s neck with a sigh, and Richie had to bite back the ridiculous urge to cry. Eddie was so warm it was almost uncomfortable, his breath hot and wet against the back of Richie’s neck, and his fist was bunched up loosely in the front of Richie’s shirt. Richie was uncomfortable and too warm and would definitely have a crick in his neck in the morning. He wanted to stay like how they were curled up together forever, anyway, achy neck or not.

For Richie and his friends, nightmares weren’t just nightmares. They were real things they’d seen and fought and gotten away from but only just. There’d been no sense of relief after the fight at Neibolt that Richie could remember, just an uncomfortable haze of exhaustion and confusion that never seemed to lift completely. It was like he knew it wasn’t over, that they still weren’t safe.

Despite all that, there was nowhere Richie felt safer than when he was with Eddie. It had become instinct that Richie sought Eddie out whenever he was feeling uneasy, reaching out for Eddie’s warmth on a reflex he’d tried for some time to train himself out of. Luckily for Richie, Eddie never minded, and even luckier, more often than not Eddie would already be reaching out for him too. They never tried to fix anything for each other, Richie never came to Eddie looking for answers, because he knew neither of them had any. But Eddie was like an anchor to Richie, one that kept him steady when the world felt too shaky and uncertain under his feet.

Richie grabbed the hand holding onto his shirt so that he could kiss Eddie’s knuckles before tangling their fingers together and mumbling a thank you into the pulse point in Eddie’s wrist. Eddie was already

half asleep and only grunted in reply, but Richie felt him tilt his head up to press a kiss into Richie's hair just before his breathing evened out and his body went slack. Richie still couldn't quite shake off the bad feeling from his dream - he'd learnt by now it took a few days at least - and whenever he shut his eyes he could see the blossoming red hole in Eddie's chest and his terrified face as blood poured out of his mouth. There was another feeling behind the fear, something that was just out of reach as the dream replayed through Richie's head, but he tried to push it away, focusing on Eddie's body wrapped around him instead.

At least, he thought as he finally started to drift back off to sleep, when they moved away from Derry and their memories were taken away, their dreams might get a little kinder. He couldn't dream of people he didn't know, of things he didn't remember, so maybe the nightmares would stop.

Somehow, Richie already knew that they wouldn't get that lucky.

*

Working at the old corner store had been a means to an end. Richie had been desperate for a car, and his parents promised if he got a job that they'd help him pay for it. So he'd worked through most of the summer, bored out of his mind and stuck behind a counter in a store with no air conditioning.

It was finally worth it when he came home to a rusted old Ford parked in his driveway, his parents sat inside honking its horn, grinning and waving madly at him. The deal had been for him to keep his job until he got the car, but Mr. Dawson, who owned the store, was old and struggled to walk, let alone stack the shelves, so Richie had offered to stay until he moved away from Derry.

Most days he was there were spent sitting around and trying desperately not to fall asleep or die of boredom before his shift was up. He'd been counting down the hours, drumming a beat out on his

knees and staring at the clock on the wall, willing it to go faster. Now it was ten minutes till his shift was up, and Richie was buzzing with anticipation, energy sparking at the tips of his fingers. He'd promised Eddie they'd start cleaning out his car, and Eddie wanted to figure out just how much space they'd have to fit all of their bags in there without it causing a hazard. Eddie had also somehow managed to convince a large majority of their friends to help them with cleaning the car, since clearly Eddie didn't trust Richie to do it properly. Richie would rather they did something more fun, but after a day at work anything was better than sitting alone in silence like he had been for hours. He couldn't wait to see his friends and get to have a conversation that wasn't just awkward small talk with customers. He couldn't wait to see Eddie again, too - even though they'd only seen each other yesterday - the thought alone made him grin and look back at the clock. Five minutes to go.

The bell on the front door rang, and it took all of Richie's energy not to groan out loud, because of *course* a customer would come in just before he got to escape. Richie took his feet off from where they were resting on the counter and stood up to see Stan stood watching him, eyebrow raised and a hand on his hip.

"You look busy," he commented. "Do you just get paid to sit there all day?"

Richie stretched himself out, before puckering his face up and tilting his head back to look down at Stan through his glasses perched on the edge of his nose. He tucked one arm behind himself and clicked his heels together before bowing and putting on his Butler voice.

"And how may I help you, good sir?" he drawled.

Stan rolled his eyes tiredly, but his mouth wobbled in a way that let Richie know he was fighting a smile.

"I brought you something." Stan looked almost nervous as he dug around in the bag looped over his shoulder, muttering something to himself. He pulled out a brown envelope and put it down on the counter, motioning for Richie to open it.

In the envelope was a chunk of polaroids, and Richie flicked his way

through them as Stan watched, wringing his hands together anxiously. It was various photos of all of his friends, some photos from years ago when they were much younger - times Richie could hardly remember - and some more recent ones. There was one of him and Bev sat on top of his car after he'd just gotten it, leaning back onto their hands, faces tilted to the sun. One of all of them down in the Barrens, pants rolled up as they paddled through the water, another of Richie with his arms looped around Stan and Eddie's necks, pulling them close as they all grinned at the camera. When Richie laid them all out they filled the counter completely, all perfect snapshots from different times in Richie's life, all of them including his favourite people. Richie's heart squeezed and he looked up to Stan, who was looking down at the photos, eyebrows drawn together.

"Most of them are photocopies because everyone needed one, but these ones are yours to take with you when you leave," Stan mumbled, tapping the photos with his finger.

Richie picked one of the photos again - one of him up on Ben's shoulders, arms in the air, cheering - and realised there was writing on the back of it. *Richie Tozier and Ben Hanscom. Summer '90.* Richie started to turn all of the photos over and realised Stan had written on each one; the date and who was in the photo neatly printed out in block capitals.

Stan spoke again. "I know it seems a little stupid to write our full names, but-" he drifted off, and Richie nodded in understanding. If they forgot each other, if they couldn't remember each other's names anymore and came across these photos with no explanation, they'd have no idea how to find their friends again.

Stan had been desperate for his own polaroid camera since they were eleven. He'd used to borrow his dad's every weekend before finally he got his own for his fifteenth birthday. He'd carried it everywhere despite the fact it was heavy and awkward and the strap around his neck always left burns on his skin. Richie could easily remember Stan taking pictures of birds he saw and closeups of random trees because he remembered making fun of him for it; but when he thought about it some more he could remember Stan taking plenty of pictures of his friends too. He even would relent his camera to Mike, sometimes - the only other person he trusted with it - to take photos

where Stan was involved too.

Stan was so often old before his time. He was more practical and organised than any other teenager Richie had ever known, with his albums full of categorised bird photos, and reading glasses he didn't exactly need but used 'just in case'. It was times like this that Richie was especially grateful for Stan and how he was, because he knew that none of the others would have done this, or even *thought* to do it. Stan cared so deeply and always seemed to know the right thing to do, especially when it came to helping his friends.

Most of the photos were blurry, with thumbprint smudges in the corners or with someone in the photo blinking or pulling a funny face, but Richie loved all of them. Each one made something fizz up inside of him, the light from a ghost of a memory, maybe memories that he could try to keep now that he had something to remind him.

Richie walked out from behind the counter so he could tackle Stan into a hug, and Stan made a weak noise of protest but hugged Richie back anyway. Stan was always slow with hugs, like he needed time to thaw out and melt into them, but eventually his arms moved, trailing up Richie's back and holding on tight. Stan sighed in relief as he relaxed, and Richie smiled to himself.

"Here I was thinking you were just being boring and taking terrible photos of birds all this time," Richie mumbled into Stan's shoulder.

Stan snorted. "My bird photos aren't terrible, birds are *much* better models than you losers. You guys can't stay still for more than three seconds so all your photos are blurry. You're lucky I wasted my films on you."

Richie squeezed Stan a little tighter. "Yeah," he replied softly, "We really are."

The door's bell jingled again and Stan moved to step away, but Richie kept holding on. It was four o'clock - closing time - and he knew exactly who was coming through the door.

"Hi Stan, did you know you have a weird looking creature attached to you?" Eddie asked cheerfully. Stan laughed into Richie's shirt, and Richie turned his head to look at Eddie, holding one of his arms out.

“Get in here. We’re having a moment,” he said, motioning Eddie over with his finger.

Eddie made a point of sighing loudly and rolling his eyes but stepped over anyway, letting Stan and Richie pull him into their hug.

“Why are we hugging?” asked Eddie, voice muffled from where he’d buried his face into Richie’s neck.

“Because Richie has no concept of personal boundaries.” Stan said, starting to move away. Stan had a limit of how long he could stand people being in his space, and he’d clearly reached it, but he kept close enough so that their shoulders were all still bumping together.

“I just have a lot of love to give,” Richie protested with a sniff.

Stan gave Eddie an envelope the same as Richie’s, and when Eddie shuffled through the photos his face was full of wonder. There were a few in Eddie’s that Richie didn’t have in his, like one of Bill, Eddie, and Georgie in Bill’s backyard just before Georgie had died. Eddie ran his fingers across that one, face dropping slightly, and Richie reached over to give Eddie’s arm a squeeze.

Eddie pulled Stan into his own hug after that, and Richie didn’t miss how Stan’s eyes were a little shiny before he squeezed them shut to hug Eddie back.

Richie collected up his own photos carefully, putting them back in the envelope with his name printed across the front.

“Hey Stan, want to come help with de-germifying my car?” he asked, but Stan was already shaking his head before Richie could finish.

“Definitely not. I’m going to the arcade with Bill.”

Richie froze at that, letting out a low whine, and Eddie grabbed his wrist, giving him a stern look. “No, Richie, you promised we’d clean the car today,” Eddie insisted when he saw Richie’s desperate expression.

“One game,” he pleaded, putting his hands together and holding them up to Eddie, pouting.

"It's never just *one* game. We'll end up there for hours," Eddie argued, but Richie could tell he was already thinking about giving in.

"Are you seriously going to turn down the opportunity to kick Stan and Bill's asses at Street Fighter?" he asked, and heard Stan make an affronted noise behind him.

Eddie sighed loudly, deflating as he relented with a short nod, and Richie cheered, pressing a smacking kiss to Eddie's forehead that he wiped off with a grimace.

"We can tell the others too," Richie said excitedly. "Make it a party."

"I didn't say *any* of you were invited," Stan complained, but Richie ignored him. He was already bouncing with excitement as he darted around the shop, shutting everything up before grabbing the keys and herding his friends out.

"I can't believe Mr Dawson trusts you with his shop," Eddie said as Richie started to lock up. "I know for a fact you've lost the keys at least three times, and you've forgotten to lock up completely more times than that. Do you remember when you left the back door open and that family of raccoons moved in?"

Richie sniggered, nodding. The raccoons managed to make their way through three boxes of candy and made a nest under the desk before they were caught. Richie and Mike had to wrestle them out using sweeping brushes, but they hadn't gone without a fight. "I named them after you guys. I should have kept them as pets," he replied wistfully, and both Eddie and Stan made a face.

"You would've died from rabies in a week," said Stan.

"That's disgusting. They're *riddled* with diseases," added Eddie.

Richie leaned in close to Eddie, nudging into him. "So is your mom, but you still love her," he quipped, earning an elbow in the ribs from Eddie.

"I should have seen that one coming," Eddie muttered darkly, holding out his hand to take the store keys from Richie. It was a

wordless thing, now, that Richie gave his valuable things to Eddie to take care of. From money to movie tickets and the keys to his house, Eddie always held on to them for Richie, because Richie knew that Eddie would never lose them.

It had started because Richie's pockets always had holes in, and because Eddie always had his fanny pack, so would often carry around things for the Losers since he had somewhere safe to put stuff. But Richie was *scatterbrained* - as his mother called it - and forgot where he put almost everything the second it was out of his sight. It was something he really hated about himself, that he'd lost so many things because his attention was stolen by something different, or just because he didn't put enough effort into finding somewhere safe for it. Richie couldn't remember when Eddie had started keeping things for him regularly, or exactly how it had started, but Richie barely lost anything anymore thanks to him.

Richie didn't give Eddie the store keys this time though, instead he spun them around on his finger, out of Eddie's reach. "I gotta go drop these at Mr D's place," he said brightly. "I'll use his phone to call the others and meetcha at the arcade." Bill's house was just around the corner from the store, and he would no doubt be waiting outside for Stan already. Richie and Bev were the only ones ever late for anything, and it drove the others mad.

Richie reached over and tugged at Eddie's earlobe, making him yelp and turn to glare at him.

"Don't start having fun without me," Richie called out, walking backwards for a few steps so that he could salute to Stan and Eddie before heading off to find his car.

He didn't realise Eddie had followed him until he snuck up behind him and prodded at his neck. Richie shrieked and swore loudly, spinning around to see Eddie doubled over laughing.

"Oh my god," Eddie wheezed. "That was amazing. You scream like a girl."

Richie tried to scowl, but laughter was bubbling up in his throat at the sight of Eddie giggling so hard, and he had to cover his mouth to

hide it.

"I didn't *scream*," he protested, but Eddie ignored him and kept on laughing. "Why are you even here? I thought you and Stan were going to Bill's," Richie added haughtily.

Eddie straightened up, his eyes still creased up and bursts of laughter still escaping in little hiccups. "I decided to come with you instead," he shrugged, trying to sound casual about it even though his ears were turning red at the admission.

Richie's face lit up. "So you couldn't bear to be away from me for even a second? That's a little clingy, Eds," he teased, and Eddie groaned.

"That's not what I said!" he protested, crossing his arms across his chest and avoiding Richie's eyes.

"It's ok, I miss you when we're not together too," Richie had meant to add in a voice or a joke to take the weight off of his words, but they just ended up coming out in his own voice, bare and almost painfully honest. The smile he got from Eddie in return made it completely worth it.

For most of the drive to Mr. Dawson's house, Eddie bitched about the state of Richie's car, namely all of the empty candy wrappers and cigarette boxes littering the ground. But his cursing and insults were weakened by the fact he kept one of Richie's hands in his the whole time, running his thumb across Richie's knuckles absently.

They decided to pick Bev up on their way, knowing she was waiting for them anyway, and when they got to her aunt's house Richie blared the horn for a little longer than he should, earning a glare from Bev's neighbours.

"I seriously don't know how we're all going to fit in this crappy car," Eddie griped, looking around the small amount of space. "Do you expect us to sleep in here too?"

Richie shrugged, leaning forward to put his arms on the steering wheel and resting his cheek on top of them, facing Eddie.

"Sometimes, if there's no motels or whatever," he said, and when Eddie made a pained sound Richie laughed.

"There's no way we can all sleep in this fucking car, I mean—" Eddie stopped and grunted, wriggling his way between the two front seats to get into the back. Eddie started thudding around behind him, and Richie heard the click as Eddie pushed the back seats down, muttering under his breath.

Eddie reached forward to the front and yanked at Richie's shirt, pulling him backwards until Richie got the idea to follow and crawl into the back seats. He ended up getting kicked in the shin and head-butting Eddie's shoulder as they both tried to untangle their limbs and fit into the small space left in the back.

"See! Two of us can barely fit here," Eddie said triumphantly. "Bev's small but she's not *that* small. We can't all sleep in this car."

Richie sighed and managed to squirm around until he and Eddie were almost laid side by side, their bodies overlapping slightly and heads close together.

"I think it's quite comfortable," he mused, only half joking, and Eddie scoffed.

"This is definitely *not* comfortable, you're cutting off the circulation to my arm," he argued, trying to roll away. Eddie's leg was stuck under Richie's, so he hauled himself upright until he was free, and ended up half straddling Richie's thighs, legs tucked underneath himself and a hand on Richie's chest.

Richie propped himself up on his elbows to smirk at Eddie, who seemed to realise what it looked like at the same time Richie spoke.

"You know, it would have been nice for you to take me out to dinner first, Mr Kaspbrak," he crooned, wiggling his eyebrows. Eddie's face had gone bright red and he let out streams of swears as he tried to get out of Richie's lap, wiggling himself backwards and bumping his head off the car's roof.

"Let me just—" Richie started, trying to sit himself up to make room as

Eddie tried to stretch out his legs.

“I just need to-” Eddie grunted and swore again. “Why do you have the smallest car in the fucking world?” he grumbled before he lost his balance and toppled backwards, falling into the space between the back and front seats.

Richie laughed so hard that it became more just silent wheezing as Eddie flailed around and tried to get himself back up again, reaching out to Richie with a face like thunder.

“Asshole, stop laughing at me and *help*,” Eddie complained, but Richie could see he was laughing too, eyes scrunched shut and body shaking.

Bev appeared then, jumping into the passenger side of the car and turning around to look at the two boys - Richie still crying with laughter and Eddie a mash of limbs trapped between the seats - and raised an eyebrow.

“Do I want to know what the hell you two were doing for Eddie to end up like that?” she asked, hooking her chin over the back of the seat.

“Eddie was trying to figure out sleeping arrangements. I think he found his perfect spot,” Richie said in between wheezing breaths, and Eddie growled from where he was still struggling to get up.

Bev made a face. “We are never sleeping in this car,” she said bluntly, and Eddie cheered, managing to twist his hand around so that he could high five Bev.

“*Thank you*. At least two of us are normal, rational people,” he huffed, and Richie rolled his eyes, grabbing Eddie’s wrist to finally pull him free and up onto the back seat again.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Richie asked. “Sleeping in your trusty ride is part of the road trip experience.”

Bev wrinkled up her nose. “I don’t think this hunk of junk could ever be described as *trusty*.”

"I'd rather sleep on the ground," Eddie added flatly, and Richie gasped, petting at the car's seats.

"Don't listen to 'em, baby. You're the best car ever," he cooed. Eddie sighed tiredly but Richie could see that he was fighting a smile.

Richie really did love his car. It usually took a couple of tries and a prayer to start, the A/C never worked, and the driver's side window was jammed, but it was all his. There were clusters of stickers on the dashboard that Bev had bought him, heaps of mixtapes Mike had given to him stowed away in the dashboard compartment, and an alien shaped air freshener Stan had given him hung onto the mirror. There were shoe prints and cigarette burns and unidentifiable stains left by each of his friends from all of the times they'd piled into his car for lifts to work or late night snack runs. Richie had worked to earn his car and he loved it, despite its flaws.

Richie loved the car even more because of Eddie, because he had been the main reason that the car was running at all. A couple of summers ago Eddie had started going with Richie to Mike's farm when Richie would go to help with chores, but instead of the barn chores Eddie had volunteered to help Mike fix up his dad's ancient old truck. Eddie never did anything by halves, so ended up reading every book he could find on cars - even getting Richie to quiz him some nights as they sat in his room - and he'd learned everything he could. When Eddie and Mike finally got the truck to start, Eddie had looked the happiest Richie had ever seen him, even though he'd been covered in grease and oil and had stained his favourite shirt.

When Richie first got his car it was barely working, and he'd immediately thrown the keys to Eddie, asking for his help. Eddie had lit up again like he had when he'd heard the first rumble of Mike's old truck, his face all kinds of hopeful.

Eddie had spent hours methodically working through the car, fixing up things Richie hadn't thought of or didn't even know about. Richie mostly just watched, sat on the curb smoking a cigarette whilst music drifted out of the car's radio and Eddie worked. A special sort of serenity seemed to wash over Eddie when he could work on things like that, going over checklists in his mind and connecting dots until everything was in order. Richie's car truly became something special

to him once Eddie had fixed it up - the paint was chipping off, there was still rust eating into the bottom of it, and the left outside mirror was still smashed - but to Richie, it felt brand new.

Richie knew Eddie loved the car too, despite all his complaining. It was Eddie's car just as much as it was Richie's.

Richie held his keys out between Eddie and Bev, dangling them off his fingers.

"Who wants to be my chauffeur?" he asked in a snooty voice. It was supposed to be a mix of British Guy and something else he hadn't named yet, but Eddie insisted the two voices sounded exactly the same anyway.

Eddie snatched the keys before Richie had even finished his sentence, crawling into the driver's seat whilst Bev glared at him and Richie stretched his legs out in the back seats.

"You're not allowed to drive," Eddie said to Bev as he started the car. Richie didn't miss how he petted the wheel ever so slightly when the car sputtered to life on the first try. "You'll kill us all."

Richie had to hide his laughter in his hand to avoid Bev's glare turning on him. Bev really was a terrible driver; Ben was the most patient so had tried to teach her after she pleaded with him for weeks, but after one drive he staggered out pale and dizzy, and had managed to avoid getting into a car with her ever since. Even Richie was a little scared of Bev's driving, and he'd once tried to drive his car with his feet just to see if he could.

"You're so dramatic," Bev sighed, kicking her feet up on the dashboard. Eddie always kept his hands at ten and two and always kept to the speed limit, but he had wicked road rage. Richie thought of their upcoming road trip and grinned, imagining Bev insisting she'd drive whilst Eddie panicked, of Eddie hanging out of his window to yell at someone who'd cut them off, of them all squeezing into Richie's tiny car and getting as far away from Derry as they could. Richie couldn't wait.

The arcade had used to be one of Richie's sanctuaries. Like the movie theatre or the Barrens, it was a place that felt like it belonged to him, where he could escape from everything else. He'd spent most of his time there when he was younger, and it had been a pocket of space that seemed just outside of Derry; one of the rare places that Derry's darkness couldn't touch.

Richie had let his guard down there, had made friends with a boy outside of the Losers and handed out his heart to him in the form of a chipped arcade token, and then Bowers had barrelled in just at the right time to really make a mark. Bowers shoved his way right into Richie's one small space of comfort - as if he hadn't already taken most of Richie's childhood - and he ripped it all to shreds. The arcade didn't feel safe anymore after that, became another place that was haunted with memories of angry words and that blood curdling shame Richie was so familiar with. He hadn't been in such a long time because he was too afraid to go alone, terrified to walk in and see the exact same people that had been there that day, still staring at him like he was something terrible.

But this particular night had been different. All of the Losers were together, and Richie had been quickly submerged in their laughter and the electric harmonies of all of the machines around him, so much so that he forgot he'd ever been scared for a while.

That was until Richie left to go get more tokens and he was cornered by two boys he didn't recognise, but knew the looks on their faces well enough.

They both glared down at Richie's hands, and it was only then that he remembered Bev had painted his nails a deep pink the last time she'd done them. He hadn't minded - they'd been high and Richie kind of liked the colour at the time - but going somewhere like the arcade with it still on had been a bad idea.

One of the boys raked his eyes up and down Richie's body, making him shudder. "What the fuck are *you* supposed to be?" he sneered,

and Richie knew that face. He had seen too many people looking at him that way; like there was something wrong with him, an infection that Richie couldn't see but they could.

The boys couldn't have been much older than Richie - maybe even younger than him - but Richie suddenly felt eleven all over again, small and confused and scared. Bowers had started to hurt him and really mean it right around when Richie turned eleven, and though he never stopped until the day he was arrested, Richie always ended up feeling like a child again when something like this happened.

A rough hand grabbed Richie's jaw, squeezing too tight.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, fairy," the boy demanded. Richie did as he was told, even though he felt like his insides were turning to acid, slowly melting him down.

"People like you aren't welcome here," the other boy who was standing behind his friend chimed in, and Richie would have laughed at that if he hadn't been so scared. *No one* was welcome in Derry; Richie had learned that when he was young and the streets would flood so terribly that whole chunks of road would float away, along with the bodies of people less fortunate than him. Derry was a pit of despair and hate and Richie supposed the only people that were welcome in a place like that were the ones that were standing in front of him.

People like you. Richie wanted to laugh at that too, because he'd heard that so many times and still didn't understand what it meant. All he knew was that he'd ended up hating himself for existing, for taking up a particular space in the world that other people saw as different and wrong.

There used to be a time when Richie would argue back - and maybe he would have, he figured, if he hadn't been so thrown off by his night going from nothing but joy to this - but he'd lost his fight. Most of what they said was true anyway, and Richie would end up hurting from it no matter what, either from the words cutting into him like knives, or from actual punches thrown if he chose to fight back.

One boy was right in Richie's face, nails digging into the hinge of his

jaw, and Richie found himself thinking that he'd rather fight the clown a hundred times over this. He'd take the paralysing fear of walking through Neibolt over and over if it meant he never had to face people like these again. People who hated Richie because of how he looked or acted or talked, who wanted to hurt him just because he was slightly out of line from how they thought he should be.

"You're disgusting," the boy all but snarled. There were people all around them, the arcade busy with children and their tired parents, but no one even spared Richie a second glance. He was sure some of them were even in earshot, could see how Richie was backed into a corner and hear what was being growled in his face, but they acted like he wasn't even there.

The two boys kept on spitting words at him, all the ones Richie had heard before but that never hurt any less, and Richie was so tired of this. He was sick of this feeling, sick of being forced to look at himself and hate what he saw.

Finally the first boy let go of his face roughly, and Richie squared his shoulders and lifted his head, trying to stop his hands from shaking. He needed to get out, to find his friends and hide away until the world stopped falling apart around him.

"Fuck you," he growled with as much venom as he could, moving forward to walk past the boys, to get away. But he was quickly stopped and shoved backwards, the corner of one of the machines behind him digging into his back.

Someone appeared at Richie's shoulder then, bumping into it, and Richie looked over to see Mike beside him, glaring at the two boys. Then Richie noticed Bill, Stan, Ben, and Bev all lining up next to him, too. Bev gave Richie's arm a squeeze, and all of his friend's faces were thunderously angry as they stared down at the two boys stood in front of them.

Eddie caught up last, but didn't stop to stand by Richie like the others. Instead he kept going and slammed himself into the closest boy's chest, knocking him to the ground. Eddie was fairly small - his growth spurt not nearly as dramatic as any of the others - but as he stood in front of the two boys with his hands curled into fists and

fury sparking out of him, Richie could swear he looked ten feet tall.

Richie didn't have time to be in awe, though, because he knew exactly what would come next, and knew from experience what the punishment for retaliation was. Richie moved to get to Eddie but the boy still standing was quicker, and he grabbed Eddie's arm as his friend struggled to his feet before punching Eddie, his fist connecting with Eddie's jaw with a sickening crack.

It was chaos after that. Richie's friends all rushed forward to push the two boys away from Eddie whilst Eddie swayed on the spot - Richie wondered dimly how he'd managed to stay upright after such a hard punch - and everyone began shouting at each other.

Richie stepped up next to Eddie and grabbed hold of the back of his sweater, both to stop him from falling and from lunging forward at the boys again, since he looked like he was seriously considering it. Mike had a vice grip on one of the boy's shoulders, stopping him from moving, and Bill and Ben were pushing the other back from where he was trying to get at Eddie.

Eddie crossed his arms across his chest, he was grimacing ever so slightly but still managed to look absolutely furious. "There's seven of us and two of you. Do you *really* want to try your luck, fucknuts?" he called out to the boys, who just glared and spat insults back at him, trying to get close enough to get another swing in.

The arcade owner came over then, shouting at them all, and everyone immediately scattered. Bev grabbed Eddie's hand to pull him away and Richie followed, still holding on tight to Eddie's sweater as they all bustled out of the back doors and away from the two boys who were cursing loudly as they were pushed out of the entrance.

As soon as they were back out into the light Eddie turned to face Richie and Richie bumped into his chest, stumbling backwards. Eddie's eyes were wide and his face was contorted in the way Richie knew meant he wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry as blood dribbled steadily out of his mouth and down his chin. Richie opened his mouth to speak, but a memory slammed into him all of a sudden, snapshots of his latest dream where he'd seen Eddie looking almost

painfully similar. Richie went cold, vision swimming as the Eddie in front of him merged with the nightmare where Eddie had torrents of blood pouring out of his mouth and his chest, his eyes wide and face pale.

Richie slumped himself down heavily on the curb, feeling dizzy as he tried to blink away the images in his head, and Eddie followed to kneel in front of him.

“Woah, Richie, are you ok?” he asked softly. He had his hand on Richie’s knee and little drops of blood fell from his lips onto Richie’s pants.

Eddie was fine, Richie reminded himself, this wasn’t his dream. Eddie was wearing one of Richie’s old sweaters and there was no wound there, no blood seeping through his chest. A car horn blared and it made Richie jump, but it brought him back to reality again, back to the arcade and far away from the sewers.

“I should be asking *you* that. You just got punched in the face,” Richie choked out, and Eddie laughed brightly, teeth stained red but smile bright anyway.

Eddie sat back and prodded at his face gently whilst the others surrounded him and Richie on the ground, watching Eddie warily.

“Nothing’s broken,” Eddie said decisively. “And he missed my nose, thank god. I think my teeth just went through my cheek or something,” he explained as he gestured to the blood still dripping down his chin.

“And your lip is busted,” Bev added from beside Richie as Eddie rummaged around in his pocket for some tissues to stop the bleeding. Bev took them from his hand wordlessly and cradled his head as she dabbed at the blood, apologising whenever Eddie winced.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, looking down at the blood soaked tissues in Bev’s hand. “This is gonna bruise. My mom’s gonna *kill* me.”

Eddie was griping about bruises and being covered in blood, but Richie could see his eyes had an exhilarated spark to them, the spark

he always got whenever he did something reckless. He used to get that look whenever he'd sneak out of his bedroom window after lights out, or just before he flung himself over the edge of the highest cliff at the quarry. Richie stared at Eddie for a while, mapping out Eddie's face with his eyes and trying to calm down his hammering pulse. For a terrifying second the nightmares Richie had been having became a reality when he'd seen Eddie's face covered in blood, and Richie had been waiting for it to get worse, for blood to start coming through Eddie's sweater too, for his other friends to start bleeding beside him.

The nightmares had become so vivid that Richie was always on edge now, like it was just a matter of time before they became reality. His hands shook and he curled them into fists, rolling his eyes at himself and trying to focus on Eddie still complaining loudly about how hard it was to wash out blood stains.

Someone put their hand on Richie's shoulder, and Richie turned to see Stan watching him carefully, quirking up an eyebrow in question. Richie shook it off and turned back to Eddie.

"You sure you don't want to switch your career from doctor to professional boxer, Eds?" Richie asked in a gruff voice, holding up his fists. His smile still felt a little rigid, and the voice he put on sounded off, but the others laughed anyway.

"I didn't even get a punch in," Eddie pointed out, rolling his eyes. He looked triumphant regardless, still smiling widely despite the deep cut on his lip.

"But you would have," Bev said, patting him on the back and grinning. "You'd have totally taken them both if we hadn't have stopped you."

Richie glanced around to see that everyone was looking at Eddie with a little bit of admiration in their faces. All of them had grown up being shouted at and beaten up, meaning they'd all quickly learned ways to avoid the worst blows, or better, become invisible enough to stay out of their bullies sights. But this time, in the face of the kinds of people the Losers had hidden from so many times before Eddie had stormed in anyway, knowing from experience that it wouldn't end

well, but still sticking his hand in the lion's cage without a second thought.

"Well, they'd have deserved it if I had," Eddie replied haughtily, and god, Richie adored him.

Ben bumped into Richie's shoulder. "What were they saying to you, Richie?" he asked quietly, and Richie stiffened up when everyone's eyes fell on him.

Richie had never been able to say any of it out loud, not even as a joke, not even around his friends; just the words circling around his head had been too much. The others would often meet up to complain about the newest insult Bowers or the other had thrown at them whilst the rest of the Losers would comfort them and insist that whatever they said hadn't been true.

But the worst part about it all is what they said to Richie said was true, and it meant that Richie had learnt to hate himself and who he was before he'd even fully understood it. Bowers had looked into Richie's soul and clawed at parts of himself that were only just forming, leaving scars there that Richie was sure would never heal.

"Nothing we all haven't heard before," Richie replied eventually, trying to sound nonchalant. Eddie reached over and put a hand on Richie's knee again, and Stan wrapped an arm around his shoulders as Bev moved to kiss the top of his head before kissing the top of Eddie's too.

"We'll be out of here and far away from those assholes soon," said Bev, and Richie tried to smile at her but it fell a little flat. Derry was a pressure cooker of hate that suffocated them all, but Richie wasn't naive enough to believe that moving away meant they'd never have to deal with that kind of violence again. People like Bowers and the boys in the arcade were everywhere, and would no doubt be able to seek out people like Richie easily.

Eddie came back to Richie's house with him. He didn't say a word about it as he followed Richie to his car when everyone else had left the arcade, but Richie knew that Eddie had been avoiding his mother even more than normal lately. Eddie wanted to move out of Derry

desperately, but he knew that being around his mother for too long could give her the chance to convince him to stay. Just because Eddie was aware of how his mother could manipulate him didn't make him immune to it, and she knew exactly what to say to make her thoughts sound far too much like his own.

Eddie went straight to the mirror in Richie's room when they got to the house, prodding at his jaw again and grimacing. A yellow bruise was already starting to blossom against Eddie's skin, with darker green spots high on his cheekbone from the other boy's knuckles. Richie stepped up behind Eddie so that he could kiss a particularly sore looking spot carefully, and he felt triumphant when he saw Eddie's frown melt into a smile in the reflection of the mirror. Richie rummaged around his desk drawers for a while whilst Eddie kept on poking at his face, and when Richie found what he was looking for he waved it in front of Eddie's face, humming a fanfare.

Eddie frowned, turning away from the mirror to look at Richie. "Is that makeup?" he asked, and Richie nodded.

"It was Bev's. She gave me it last year - remember when I busted my face up and got two black eyes?" Richie made a face at the memory.

Eddie made a face too, almost exactly the same chastising look he'd had when Richie had hurt himself back then. "I *told* you that you couldn't do a backflip, dipshit," he muttered, and Richie waved it off.

"Stan dared me, I couldn't just say no," Richie argued, but Eddie rolled his eyes.

"Stan dared you to do a backflip. He didn't dare you to backflip out of a *tree*," Eddie retorted, his face growing more thunderous as he remembered. Richie had landed face first and knocked himself out, and when he woke back up Eddie had been hysterical. Even Stan had looked absolutely terrified, so Richie knew it had been pretty bad.

"I can't believe you even *thought* that shit was a good idea. You're uncoordinated at the best of times because you're like a fucking giraffe, and you-" Eddie started to rant, hands waving and nostrils flaring, but Richie interrupted, holding a hand in front of Eddie's face. He had gotten an earful from a furious Eddie back then, too, he

didn't need it a second time.

"Alright, alright. It was stupid, I was a moron, I know. But we're talking about you and your own fucked up face right now," he pointed out. Eddie growled but stopped talking, crossing his arms across his chest with a huff.

Richie pushed Eddie to sit on the bed before he sat himself down to face him, legs crossed as he unscrewed the lid of the little bottle of liquid. Bev had given him a sponge to put it on before, but Richie had quickly lost it, so instead he poured some onto his fingers and ignored Eddie's disgusted face when he accidentally dribbled some onto the bed sheets.

"This stuff at least hid most of the bruising so my parents didn't freak out," Richie said, smoothing some of the cream across Eddie's jaw and murmuring an apology when Eddie flinched. The cream was slightly paler than Eddie's skin, but it worked for covering up the bruise across Eddie's cheek that was slowly getting darker and more angry looking.

"I don't know which my mom would kill me for more," Eddie mused as Richie kept on smoothing the cream across his skin. "For having bruises or for wearing makeup."

Richie laughed softly, shaking his head. "How about we wipe this off and put some lipstick on you instead to see what she loses her shit at first?" he suggested, making kissy faces at Eddie who laughed loudly.

Richie had finished covering up the bruises, but he stayed sitting where he was facing Eddie, the bottle of makeup forgotten and falling to the floor but his fingers still trailing across Eddie's jawline gently.

Eddie was staring at Richie like he was looking straight through him, and Richie had to suppress a shudder. Eddie's gaze on Richie always felt intense, and it made Richie uncomfortable and exhilarated at the same time. He was so often caught between wanting Eddie to look away - worried he might eventually see something in Richie that he hated like everyone else - and wanting Eddie's eyes on him forever.

Eddie shuffled himself around a little bit more and mirrored Richie,

crossing his legs so that his and Richie's knees were overlapping. "What were those guys saying to you?" he asked Richie, tapping a finger on Richie's leg.

This time Richie sagged a little. He'd never told anyone about that time in the arcade when he'd had been chased out by Bowers, not even Eddie. He tried not to think about it, because the shame that seared through him whenever he did made him sick.

"I can't remember," Richie said honestly. By now it just blurred into a stream of black sludge, the words meaning nothing and everything all at the same time. "My fault. I made myself an easy target today." Richie took his hand away from Eddie's face to waggle his fingers, still coated in chipped pink nail polish, and Eddie's face darkened.

"Not your fault," he corrected sharply. "They're just assholes. We'll be away from them all soon."

It was the same as Bev had said, and Richie still didn't believe it. He felt like Eddie *had* to though, had to believe that everything would be so much better once he got out of Derry, or else he'd never leave. So Richie didn't argue, he just nodded.

"Well," he began, smirking at Eddie as he turned his voice shrill and put a hand on his heart. "Looks like I have a handsome knight to protect my honour now."

Eddie rolled his eyes and punched Richie's shoulder, but he still looked a little bit smug despite himself.

Richie suddenly remembered sitting by one of the sinks in the school bathroom a few years ago, nose streaming with blood after he'd said the wrong thing at the wrong time and Hocksetter had hit him square in the face with a book. Eddie had been with him then, too, stuffing wads of tissue into Richie's hands and panicking that Richie was going to die from blood loss.

"Do you remember when you promised we'd run away?" Richie asked, recalling Eddie twisting his and Richie's pinky fingers together despite the fact Richie's hand was covered in blood. Richie had been desperate to leave Derry, then, and had begged Eddie to come with

him, tears stinging his eyes. Eddie hadn't even hesitated when he'd nodded and swore to Richie that they could go whenever he wanted.

Eddie smiled, linking his and Richie's pinky fingers together just like he had back then.

"I made a plan for it, you know, in case we ever did leave," he replied softly. Richie remembered thinking afterwards that Eddie would never *actually* run away like he'd promised, so he'd tried to forget about it. Eddie didn't do spontaneity, he liked plans and guarantees and liked to organise exactly what he was doing in his head before he did it. It made Richie's heart squeeze to know despite that Eddie had taken Richie's pleading seriously then, even though they'd been so young.

They'd been reminiscing a lot lately. Not just Richie and Eddie, but all of his friends bringing up parts of the past long forgotten or never mentioned before. It felt like the conclusion to a story Richie wasn't done with yet, and it made his stomach flip uncomfortably.

Despite the uneasy feeling, Richie grinned. "Oh yeah?" he prompted.

Eddie nodded again. "We were gonna sneak out at night and steal your pop's car and drive to Florida." The tips of Eddie's ears were turning red and he couldn't quite look Richie in the eye as he moved his hand so that he could tangle his and Richie's fingers together properly. The stories Eddie had been telling Richie lately felt like secrets, like something shameful that he'd been holding close to his chest until now.

"*Florida*? It's like two thousand miles away. Why Florida?" Richie asked.

"It's one thousand, five hundred, and eighty-four. I checked," Eddie corrected. "And I don't know. I remembered Mike talking about it like it was nice, and it seemed far enough away from my mom that she wouldn't come after me."

"We could've gone to Disneyland," Richie mused, and Eddie rolled his eyes, finally looking up to grin at Richie.

“That too. I knew you’d want to go somewhere fun.”

“I could’ve gotten a job there as one of the characters!” Richie said brightly, grinning along with Eddie as he put on a voice and held his hands behind his head to make them look like ears. “I’d be a pretty swell Mickey, right?”

“More like Goofy,” Eddie retorted before laughing again, bright and sickly sweet. Richie leaned forward to kiss him, then, like he could capture that sound somehow, and Eddie’s laughter died out into a smile that made Richie’s heart do somersaults.

“It was a stupid idea, anyway,” Eddie said fondly. “You’d forgotten about it by the next day, so I threw my plans away before my ma could see them.”

“I didn’t forget,” Richie argued, frowning. He’d thought about it for months after, but he’d known Eddie had only promised because of how upset Richie had been that day, so he’d tried to shove the thoughts away. It hadn’t stopped him from daydreaming about it at any opportunity, though.

Eddie’s eyes were wide, and that searing look was back again, sending heat running through Richie’s body. “So you’d have come with me?” he asked quietly.

Richie nodded and Eddie’s jaw went slack, as if it was a surprise to him, as if Richie didn’t spend all of his time desperate to go wherever Eddie went.

“Really?” Eddie said incredulously, reaching out so that his other hand was resting on Richie’s ankle.

“Of course,” Richie said with a shrug, like there wasn’t a storm raging on inside of him at the thought. He’d follow Eddie anywhere, if he asked. “It was my idea in the first place, remember?”

Eddie shook the awestruck look off his face, expression suddenly becoming unreadable before he ducked his head. “We’d have starved to death in a week, or gotten arrested,” he scoffed.

For a second it had felt like Eddie wasn’t asking about an idea from

the past, but instead a question for the future; asking Richie if they could stay together instead of going their separate ways. Once again Richie caught himself thinking of him, Eddie, and Bev sticking together more permanently, following their dreams of running away and being free from Derry's hold on them.

"We'd have had fun though," Richie added quietly, and Eddie looked up again, face crumpling.

"We'd have ended up hating each other," Eddie argued, trying to rearrange his face back into a smile and failing. "We'd get bored of being in each other's company all the time. You'd get sick of me freaking out about germs and I'd get sick of you being so loud all the time." Eddie's voice sounded desperate, like he needed Richie to go along with this, or like he was trying to plead with himself to believe what he was saying.

They were constantly on the edge between being happy and sad lately; a whole cacophony of thoughts and feelings that had them teetering between the joy of being free and the almost unbearable grief of losing each other.

Both Eddie and Richie had told themselves lies to make themselves feel better about leaving, but this was a lie Richie couldn't go along with.

"No we wouldn't," he said, voice soft but certain. "I'm with you all the time now and I never get sick of you. You're my favourite person, Eds. Running away with you sounded pretty good to me then. Still does now."

Richie was daring Eddie to say it, to ask Richie to run away with him again, plans or no plans, but Eddie just shook his head.

"I'm going to college, and you have your plans with Bev," he pointed out. Richie wanted to say that he knew Eddie didn't want to go to college, that Bev would go anywhere Eddie wanted to, if he'd just ask. But instead Richie sighed, heart aching.

"This would be so much easier if we weren't going to forget everything when we leave this shithole," Eddie grumbled, throwing

his head back, exasperated.

“Fuck that clown,” Richie said emphatically, coaxing a surprised laugh out of Eddie.

“Fuck that clown,” Eddie echoed loudly. *“What a bitch.”*

Richie laughed with Eddie this time, and the room started to feel lighter again which Richie was grateful for. He had so many feelings weighing him down lately that it felt like it was crushing him, and he was struggling under the gravity of it.

He was the one who made jokes and had gotten avoiding talking about his feelings down to a fine art, had managed to keep them shoved away for so long it was almost easy. But now there was too much going on to ignore it, and Richie was struggling. It felt like how he had felt when they’d first fought the clown, when the aftershocks of it surrounded them in darkness, along with fear so dense it was almost tangible. Richie’s jokes had fallen flat then, too - dying on his tongue - and his friends had been like exposed nerves, their feelings pouring out of them all in waves. Richie had hated it then and he hated it now, because it put him in an unfamiliar place, way out of his comfort zone and far too vulnerable.

He knew Eddie hated it too from the way he squirmed and avoided Richie’s eyes, so Richie quickly changed the subject for the both of them. He launched himself into a story about his day at work and how a customer had spent ten minutes trying to pull the push door to get out, then yelled at Richie for having the door on wrong. He smiled, feeling victorious when Eddie visibly relaxed, laughing brightly.

Richie had always thought it was unfair that him and his friends had been made to grow up so quickly, trading in their childhoods to fight a battle that wasn’t theirs. Richie wondered if that was why it felt like them all leaving had come far too soon, because they hadn’t had enough time just being together without having something terrible looming over their heads.

They needed more time, but they didn’t have it.

As if Eddie could hear Richie’s thoughts spinning around too fast in

his head, he reached out and ran a hand through Richie's hair, pushing it out of his eyes before trailing his hand down to Richie's cheek. Richie took a breath, smiling as Eddie smoothed his thumb across the hinge of Richie's jaw, hands soft and careful and the complete opposite of the rough hands that had grabbed Richie's face earlier. Eddie looked at him so differently too; he looked at Richie like he was something fascinating - someone worth looking at - and it made Richie feel like he was glowing.

Richie wanted to ask Eddie to run away with him again, or at least tell him that they should stick together, whatever they did. Richie felt far too young, too lost and vulnerable to be losing the people he loved so much so soon. It would've been easier if it was just temporary, but because he knew they'd lose all the memories they'd made once they left Derry, leaving was starting to feel painfully wrong.

Richie's thoughts stopped whirring when Eddie leaned in to kiss him, and Richie felt the tension rush out of him in a breath as he wrapped an arm around Eddie's waist to pull him even closer.

Later could wait. Richie could think about goodbyes when it came to it. For now he had a lot of missed time to try and catch up on, a countdown to race.

Richie ended up accidentally wiping off all of the makeup on Eddie's face at some point, smudging it down his neck and onto his sweater, but neither of them cared. Eddie wasn't going anywhere yet; they had plenty of time to fix it.

Notes for the Chapter:

chapter title is from [this song](#). I do actually have a playlist for this story and I'll post that soon

find me on [tumblr](#), if you'd like